From the author of **DEATH NOTE: ANOTHER NOTE**

NISIOISIN

ZAREGOTO

BOOK 1: THE KUBIKIRI CYCLE

Illustrated by **take**

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THE KUBIKIRI CYCLE

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Illustrations by take

Translated by Greg Moore

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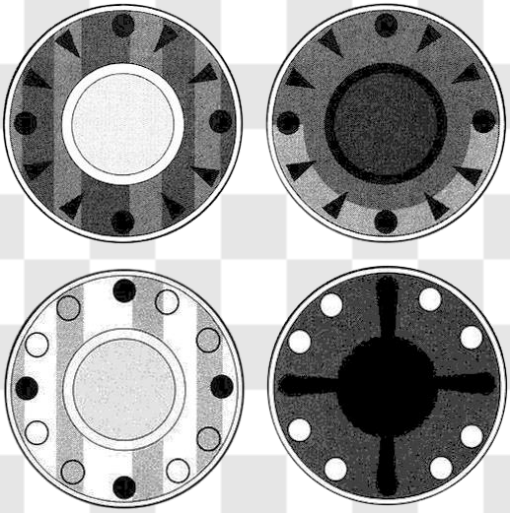
KIRISAIKURI



CONTENTS

THE THIRD DAY

1. *Savant Blue* **3**
2. *Assembly and Arithmetic* **69**

THE FOURTH DAY

1. *The First Decapitation* **113**
2. *The Tragedy of 0.14* **156**

THE FIFTH DAY

1. *The Second Decapitation* **201**
2. *Lies* **235**
3. *A Crow's Wet Feathers* **278**

ONE WEEK LATER: *Split* **321**

EPILOGUE: *Crimson Fairy Tale* **335**

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Akagami Iria: *The mistress of Wet Crow's Feather Island.*

Chiga Akari: *Oldest of the three maid sisters.*

Chiga Hikari: *Second of the three maid sisters.*

Chiga Teruko: *Youngest of the three maid sisters.*

Handa Rei: *Head maid at the mansion.*

Ibuki Kanami: *Genius painter.*

Himena Maki: *Genius fortune-teller.*

Kunagisa Tomo: *Genius engineer.*

Sashirono Yayoi: *Genius chef.*

Sonoyama Akane: *Genius and one of the Seven Fools.*

Aikawa Jun: *Most powerful private contractor in the World.*

Me (narrator): *Kunagisa Tomo's escort.*

Sakaki Shinya: *Ibuki Kanami's attendant.*

Having one too many talents is even more dangerous than having one too few.

—Nietzsche

PROLOGUE

"Isn't there something really scary about people who knowingly, consciously, use others as stepping-stones?"

Hmm. I wonder.

Actually, it's the people who *unknowingly*—with all the best of intentions and delusions of just cause—use other people who are way more disturbing.

"Haha! But you're a good guy, right?" he chuckled.

Thankfully, whether or not I'm a good guy has nothing to do with anything. Instead, it's like this: it's not about two different ways of thinking, it's about different ways of *living* life. About the absolute and enormous difference between people who can get through life without even needing to walk over others—and those who aren't even worth walking over.

Yeah, I guess that's what this is really all about.

Like a painter without a style.

Like a scholar whose studies are complete.

Like a chef who has already tasted success.

Like a fortune-teller who has transcended too far.

The women on that island were far too different. Both the host and the guests were of a hopelessly different breed, of an unstoppably different breed, of a different breed you would never want to stop. Their existence was so out of reach, so distant that you could never even hope to muster a desire to approach it.

And then…

"In other words, this is a question of 'What is genius, and what isn't?' Now, being incompetent—that's what's best, really. To be completely obtuse. To be so oblivious as to *never think for a second* about one's purpose in life, to never think about the meaning of life, to never think about the *value* of life. Then this world would be a paradise. Calm, peaceful, and serene. Trivial things would be major and major things trivial, and life could be lived to its fullest."

Surely that was indeed the case.

The world is harsh to the brilliant. The world is harsh to the competent.

The world is harsh to the beautiful. The world is harsh to the attentive.

The world is kind to the unkempt. The world is kind to the incompetent.

The world is kind to the corrupt. The world is kind to the oblivious.

But if you figure *that* out, if you realize *that*, it's already over right then. It's a problem with no solutions and no interpretation. It's over before it's begun, and by the time it's over, it's complete. I guess it's that kind of story.

For example:

"Essentially, people live in one of two ways. Either they live in awareness of their own worthlessness, or they live in

awareness of the worthlessness of the world. Two ways. Either you allow your value to be absorbed by the world, or you chisel away at the world's value and make it your own."

Which should take precedence, the value of the world or your own value?

To accept the world as boring or accept oneself as boring?

Which is really more agreeable?

There's bound to be some amount of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Is there really any defined criteria there?

Is it really just a choice between A and B?

Do you really have to choose?

"Where is the line between genius and not genius?"

Where is the line between what is true and who is a lie?

Where is the line between who is true and where is a lie?

You must not ask.

He snorted cynically. "So how about you then?"

Well…

"How does the world look to you?"

To me, after having experienced that island. To me, there next to the blue. To me, now with this person before my eyes, it was all just mindless babble. It wasn't even worth the trouble of even thinking of an answer.

And so I said nothing. Instead, I looked away and thought of something else.

So, how does the world look through *this* person's eyes? Just how did *I* look in this person's eyes?

ZAREGOTO

BOOK ONE

THE THIRD DAY

Kunagisa Tomo,
genius engineer.

1

SAVANT BLUE

Don't be so edgy.
Relax, okay?

1

The third morning of our life on Wet Crow's Feather Island was just greeting us. I awoke in a daze, trying to distinguish between the dreams I had just had and the reality yet to come.

The high, rectangular window admitted just a bit of light, so the room still remained dim. Since the room had no lights, I would just have to wait for it to get brighter: the sun had only just risen, and it was maybe around six a.m., judging by my internal clock. I suspect this way of determining the time has no more than a fifteen-minute margin of error. But even supposing I was an hour off, it's not like it would be a problem.

"Getting up," I mumbled, and slowly rose from bed.

The room was mostly empty, its only furnishings a chair and a futon. Aside from that, it was completely bare. Its high ceilings gave it an even more spacious feel—and that hollow, dead atmosphere that evokes so vividly images of solitary confinement or something. I couldn't help but feel a little bit like an inmate on Death Row.

It was the second time in my life I'd woken up with that feeling.

But while this was in fact *not* solitary confinement, neither was it originally a bedroom. It was formerly a storage space. When I asked Akari to show me the smallest room in the mansion, this was where she brought me. The smallest room. Even so, it was infinitely bigger than my room at the lodging house. Boy, was that ever depressing.

"Nah… it's way beyond depressing," I said to myself.

Now then. I switched my cognitive channel from Death Row Inmate Mode to Routine Mode.

Wondering what time it really was, I glanced at my wristwatch, but the LCD screen displayed nothing. Maybe the batteries had died while I was sleeping. But wait, I'd changed them just a little while ago. There had to be some other problem. Well, I could always ask Kunagisa to fix it.

Clearing my sleep-fogged mind, I did a couple of simple stretches and then left the room. I walked around for a while. The carpet was thick, bright red, and looked like (and most probably was) super-high quality. It eventually led to the spiral case, which is where I bumped into Rei-san and Akari-san.

"Oh, good morning. You two are up early." It was only common courtesy to greet them, but they simply passed by with no more acknowledgment than a silent head-bow.

"Guess they're the quiet type," I muttered to myself.

But to be fair, they were probably working, and I wasn't exactly a "guest," per se, so I just had to live with their lukewarm response. If I expected anything more out of them, I'd have to throw my arms out wide and cry out, *"How you*

feelin', my freaky people?!" And, frankly, I just didn't have the energy.

Handa Rei-san and Chiga Akari-san were maids employed at the mansion. Rei-san was the "head maid," Akari her subordinate. And there were two other maids at the mansion, of the same rank as Akari-san. A total of four maids.

Considering who owned the mansion, and the size of the mansion, it seemed as if a staff of four maids would be too small. But these women carried out their duties with the swiftness and skill of true specialists.

The mistress of the mansion, and the person these maids served, was Akagami Iria. She was the proprietress of the island, as well as the mansion. And furthermore, she was the one who had invited me and Kunagisa here.

"But wait, was I actually *invited*?" I asked myself.

Now just how old was Akari-san? You could tell just by looking at Rei-san that she was probably in her late twenties. It's not easy for kids like me to tell exactly how old a woman that age is, but that's definitely the impression I got from her. Akari-san was the real challenge. I didn't think she was younger than me, but still, she looked ridiculously young. She was one of those women you see downtown who can get away with paying half-price for everything when they're actually adults. As I went up the spiral staircase and headed down the second-floor hall, my mind tilled with nonsense. *Maybe she has a thing for young guys.* Yeah, just babbling.

I was headed for Kunagisa's room. Two days ago, when we arrived at the island, a room had of course been prepared for Kunagisa, but not for me. This was to be expected: even I had had no idea I would be visiting this weird little island until that very morning, when Kunagisa called me.

Akari-san prepared a room for me at the last minute. But I'd politely refused it. Why? The reason hit me as soon as I opened the door.

I knocked once, then went ahead and opened it.

The interior was vast. Pure white carpet and pure white wallpaper complemented pure white furniture. Even I knew that white reflects light. Kunagisa was crazy about the color white, so somebody had decorated this room this way deliberately. In the center of the room was a luxurious sofa and a wooden table. A chandelier hung from the strangely high ceiling. The bed was like something straight out of a movie set in medieval times; it even had a canopy.

"Yeah, I'd never get any sleep here."

And so I had Akari-san show me to the storage room on the first floor. Meanwhile Kunagisa, lacking my more delicate sensibilities, lay there drowsily on her pure white sheets.

Looking at the enormous, antique, mechanical clock on her wall (also ever-so-thoughtfully selected in white), I saw that it was, in fact, six o'clock, just as I'd guessed. Pondering what to do now, I sat on the side of her bed, enjoying the feeling of the thick, fluffy carpet beneath my feet.

Kunagisa rolled over. Her eyes opened, just slightly. "Hmm? Oh, Ii-chan?"

Somehow she had sensed it was me, but at any rate she seemed to be awake. She pushed her mussed, I Hawaiian-blue hair away from her face and regarded me with sleepy eyes. "Oh, ahhh, Ii-chan… ummm… You came to wake me up, didn't you? Thank you."

"Actually I came here to tuck you in, but what's this? Tomo sleeping at nighttime? That's pretty rare. Or did you just get to bed?" If that was the case I'd have to apologize.

"Uh-uh." She shook her head.

"I think I slept for three hours. Cuz y'know, yesterday, well, some stuff happened, Ii-chan. Give me five more seconds…

"Good morning! Ah, it's a bright, brisk morning, isn't it?!" She sat up, her petite little body popping up. Flashing me an ear-to-ear grin, she struck a dynamic pose. "Huh? Hey, it's not bright out at all. I don't like this. I like for the sun to be way high up in the sky when I wake up in the morning."

"You're talking about the afternoon."

"Eh, either way. That was some good sleep." Ignoring me, she kept on talking. "I'm pretty sure I got to bed at three a.m. Some really bad stuff happened yesterday and I just huffed off to bed. Y'know, cuz sleep is the best thing when you're feeling really terrible. It's like sleep is the one and only gift of salvation God gave mankind. Now, Ii-chan?"

"Yeah, Tomo?"

"Stay still for a sec."

Without even giving me time to be confused, she hugged me. Or to put it more accurately, she draped herself on me, burdening me with the entirety of her bodyweight. She rested her tiny head on my right shoulder, with our bodies stuck together, her slender arms wrapped around my neck.

Squeeze.

Not that she was heavy.

"Uh, Kunagisa?"

"*Recharging.*"

Evidently she was recharging. Thus, no moving allowed. I gave up on the idea of resistance and supported her weight.

But hey, what was I, an electrical outlet or something?

Looking at Kunagisa, I noticed she had slept with her coat on. As far as I knew, she wore it all the time, indoors and

outdoors, summer and winter. A jet-black men's coat. On a girl of Kunagisa's tiny stature, the large-sized coat easily touched the floor. But she seemed to be madly in love with it anyway. I had told her millions of times to at least take it off when she's sleeping, but to no avail.

One thing was for sure: Kunagisa Tomo did things her own way. In that sense, she was kind of like me.

"Okay, thanks!" she said, and finally let go of me. "Battery full! Now, let's go face another day."

With a grunt she rose from bed, blue hair bouncing. She walked over to the computers by the window opposite her bed. They were the three computers she had brought from her home in Shirosaki. All three were tower models. The two on the left and right were of typical size, the one in the middle was exceptionally large. They were all white, of course. I just didn't get why she was so into a color that was so easy to get dirty.

The three computers were on a U-shaped rack, with a cushiony rolling chair in the center. Kunagisa plopped down in the chair and leaned back. That way she could simultaneously control all three computers. But no matter how you counted it up, she still had only two hands. Why she would ever think to use three keyboards at the same time was beyond me.

I looked over her shoulder. The three keyboards were neither ASCII nor JIS nor Oasis, but instead some weird, mysterious key alignment. But to question the unnaturalness of it would be futile. For an engineering whiz like Kunagisa Tomo, designing a keyboard from scratch was probably like a walk in the park.

Incidentally, Kunagisa didn't use a mouse. Because "they're a total waste of time," she would say. But to a novice like me, the sight of a mouseless computer was unnerving, just totally impossible to get used to. Not that that's the worst feeling in the world.

"Ii-chan."

"Yeah?"

"Tie my hair up."

Got it. I went up to her chair. I slipped some hair bands off her arm and tied her hair into two braids.

"Man, wash your hair already. My fingers are getting oily here."

"I hate taking baths. Cuz y'know, your hair gets all wet and stuff."

"Well, of course. Look at this, the blue is getting dark."

"I can't see my own head. Hehehe, if I leave it like it is, it'll turn ultramarine. Thank you, Ii-chan," she said, biting her lower lip with a giggle. I just looked back at her with an innocent, confused smile.

"Uh, no problem, really."

Even as we talked, her fingers never stopped moving. They moved with the accuracy of a machine at a constant rhythm with every keystroke. Her movements flowed so smoothly it was as if she were unconsciously tarrying out some preplanned assignment in some preprogrammed way. Incomprehensible English characters and numbers streamed along on all three monitor displays at an unbelievable pace.

"Tomo, what are you up to, anyway? You just got up."

"Mmm, well, I don't think you'd get it even if I told you."

"Hmm. You really need all three PCs to do it?" I said.

She gave me a perplexed look. "Ii-chan, this one in the middle isn't a PC, it's a workstation," she said.

"What's a workstation? It's not a PC?"

"Nope, it's different. Well, I guess PCs and workstations are similar in that they're both intended for individual use, but, it's like, workstations are way more top-of-the-line."

"Ah, so a workstation is like a super-good PC?" I said, openly displaying my ignorance.

She groaned. "Ii-chan, a PC is a PC and a workstation is a workstation. They're both GPCs, but think of them as two completely different things."

"What's a GPC?"

She looked at me as if I were some kind of a caveman. "Ii-chan, you don't know anything, do you?" she said with a touch of disbelief. "What exactly were you doing in Houston those five years?"

"Other things."

She sighed. "Okay, okay," she said, tilting her head. Then she resumed her work as if a switch had been toggled in her brain. Letters and numbers that looked like hocus-pocus to me continued to stream by on the displays.

I wanted her to tell me a little more about the different classifications or what have you, but I'm not really that intellectually curious. Besides, it would be rude to interrupt whatever she was working on. That, and, for an "outsider" like me to try to follow this nerdy cupcake's explanations seemed as if it would just lead to a headache, so with that I ended the discussion. I massaged her shoulders for a bit, then decided to borrow her sink, where I washed my face and changed my clothes.

"Hey, Tomo, I'm gonna go for a walk."

Without looking up from her work, she gave me a halfhearted wave. The other hand kept on tapping keys. I shrugged and left the room.

2

I'd be lying if I said I knew all that much about the Akagami Foundation. They're not exactly the most well-publicized organization in the world. Plus, since they mostly operated out of the Kanto region, someone like me who was born in Kobe, grew up in Houston, Texas, and lived in Kyoto wouldn't know that much about them.

Putting it simply, the Akagami mansion was the home to a storied legacy of business barons. That business might have been some kind of trade, or a system in which money just poured in on its own. I'm not sure what exactly it is that they did, but whatever it was, one thing was for sure: the Akagami Foundation was loaded.

Holding property not just in Japan but all over the world, the Akagami Foundation was the owner of Wet Crow's Feather Island as well. And the owner of the Western-style mansion found in the center of the island was none other than Akagami Iria.

As you might guess from her name, Iria was related to the head of the Akagami Foundation—his granddaughter, in fact. She was a born-and-bred pedigreed princess, for whom no obsequious praise was too obsequious. Over time, she had inherited vast amounts of enormous wealth and unbelievable power and ruled over a great many underlings. But then, the head of the Foundation himself had completely cut her off. So maybe this is all really better expressed in the *past* tense.

Cut off.

I don't know what she did to deserve it, but it must have been something big.

Supposedly she was permanently removed from the family five years ago, at the age of sixteen. At that time, the head of the family left her with a small severance package (which was probably still an unimaginable sum to a regular Joe like me) and this island, floating around in the Sea of Japan.

In other words, she had been exiled.

Maybe these days that seems old-fashioned. But far be it for me to butt into other people's ways of doing things. Especially if those people belong to a powerful institution that's practically its own world in and of itself.

Anyway, Iria had spent the last five years here with her four maids, not once setting foot off the island. Five years on this godforsaken island in the middle of nowhere, with no amusements, no nothing. In a sense, it was life in Hell, though I would speculate that, in a different sense, it was also a little like life in Heaven.

But was Iria-san lonely or bored? Indeed, you could say Kunagisa had been invited to the island to stave off Iria's boredom. But it wasn't just Kunagisa. In the same way, it would be no exaggeration to say that Akane-san, Maki-san, Yayoi-san, and Kanami-san had all been brought here for the same purpose.

Well, okay, maybe it's a little bit of an exaggeration.

So, anyway, forbidden to leave the island, Iria-san said, "Well, if that's how it is," and proceeded to invite, as her guests, the world's most prominent figures.

Now, it "prominent figures" sounds a little weird, let me try putting it another way. Iria had decided to invite so-called

geniuses to her mansion. It was a simple plan: "If I can't go to them, they can come to me."

Famous and unknown alike, all those who possessed genuine talent and amazing skill were summoned by Iria-san, one after another after another. And, of course, all expenses, including accommodations, were covered by Iria-san. In fact, visitors to the island were often *given* money, so it was pretty much always a win-win situation for them.

To me, it seemed like Iria-san was going for that whole ancient Greek salon image, collecting and cavorting with all these artists and geniuses—and thereby living a fruitful life. To be sure, it wasn't the most typical idea around, but yes, there was something amazing about it. Aside from the mansion and the forest, the island was essentially empty—almost a desert island—and for those world-weary men and women of talent who needed to rest both the body and the mind, it was the perfect place. And thus had Iria-san's plan been a tremendous success.

Now then.

Walking around aimlessly on this empty island, basking in the forest, it was by an extremely distant cherry blossom tree that I suddenly ran into Shinya-san.

"Oh, er, that is, I mean," Shinya-san said, waving a hand to greet me. "You're quite the early bird there, eh? Mister… er, what was your name again? Sorry, my memory's a little weak, y'see."

He had a good four inches on me, and his designer clothes were much better than mine. His expression was mild-mannered, his way of speaking was mild-mannered, and so was, somehow, his clothing and stature, but whether or not Shinya-san really was mild-mannered, I couldn't say. I don't

have the skill to judge someone just based on their appearance, and I'm the last person to jump to conclusions after knowing someone for just a couple of days.

"I don't believe I ever told you," I answered with a shrug. "I'm just Kunagisa Tomo's sidekick. No need for a sidekick to have a name, am I right?"

"That's awfully modest of you. Not that it's any wonder, being on this island, but speaking of sidekicks, I suppose I'm in the same boat as you," Shinya-san said and smirked.

Yes, Shinya-san and I were no more than tagalongs. It probably goes without saying at this point, but I wasn't here walking around on this island because I was any kind of genius. Kunagisa Tomo was the "genius" here, and I was nothing more than her attendant. If she hadn't said to me, "Ii-chan, it turns out I'll be going to some island, so come with me, 'kay?" right about now I would've been in my Kyoto four-tatami-sized room getting ready for school.

No question about it: the main character here is Kunagisa Tomo. Let's just make that clear.

Now then, as for who Shinya-san was accompanying, well, she was right under the cherry blossom tree. With those thoughtful, thoughtless eyes, she gazed at the fluttering cherry blossom petals.

She had blue eyes and hair of gold. Her dress, pale in color, was out of some French movie, and was accented with dazzling jewelry. Just one of her necklaces or bracelets was likely worth more than my liver. Even if I sold off every part of my body I still couldn't pay for it.

Ibuki Kanami. One of the geniuses.

Having, supposedly, suffered problems with her legs from birth, she was confined to a wheelchair. And thus Shinya-san,

as her caretaker, had tagged along on the trip. As I'd heard it, until a few years ago, she had also been totally blind. Her blue eyes were not a sign of foreign blood.

Kanami-san was a painter.

Even I, without the slightest knowledge of that field whatsoever, had heard of her. She had earned a reputation as a painter who possessed no single style. I had never actually seen any of Kanami-san's paintings, but I thought that maybe she was gazing at the cherry blossoms in that way so as to later portray them on canvas.

"What's she doing?"

"As you can see, she's watching the cherry blossoms. It won't be long before the petals start falling. She has a fondness for that 'moment just before death,' if you will, the ephemeral things in life."

Most of the trees on the island were just your standard fare, but for some reason, there was one cherry blossom tree. It looked quite old, and the fact that there was only one on the whole island was nothing short of bizarre. Most likely, Iria-san had transplanted it here.

"So they say dead bodies are buried under cherry blossom trees, eh?"

"How dreadful."

Ouch.

I was just trying to make conversation, but instead ended it in one fell swoop. of course, it *was* pretty dreadful.

"Just joking," Shinya-san laughed.

"Personally, I think it would make more sense if that legend was about a plum tree. But then I guess it wouldn't be a legend, but a myth? Hahaha!"

"By the way, boy, have you gotten accustomed to the island yet? This is your third day here, right? Um, how long were you planning to stay again?"

"A week. So we have another few days."

"Mmm, that's too bad," he said, with a tinge of mystery.

"What's too bad?"

"Oh, it's just that I hear Iria-san's favorite will be coming here in a week. But if you're leaving in four days, you'll just miss each other, won't you? That's just too bad."

"Oh, I see." I nodded and thought about it for a moment.

Iria-san's "favorite."

In other words, the genius of geniuses.

"A chef, a fortune-teller, a scholar, an artist, and an engineer. What could be next?"

"Well, I haven't heard any specifics myself, but apparently this person is capable of just about anything. Not a 'specialist,' but a 'generalist.' Hikari-san tells me this person is as sharp as a tack and full of knowledge, and has lightning reflexes."

Hmm. Yet another totally amazing person. Let's assume it was just some ridiculously over-the-top rumor. The fact that such a rumor even existed suggested that this particular genius wasn't just anyone. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued.

"Couldn't hurt to meet this person, I guess. What do you say to asking for an extension on your visit? I'm sure Iria-san would more than welcome you."

"Sounds nice and all, but…" I probably looked less than excited. "To be honest, this island is a little stifling. For a regular kid like me, I mean," I said.

Shinya-san guffawed boisterously. "Now, now. Now, now, now, now, now there, lad. Is *that* how it is? Kanami-san and

Akane-san and all of them haven't given you a complex, have they?"

A complex. Even supposing it wasn't something you could put so bluntly, what I felt was certainly something similar. Shinya-san gave me a firm pat on the shoulder.

"There's no reason to feel inferior to that lot, right? Let's keep it together, brother! Whether it be Kanami-san…" Kanami-san glanced up from under the cherry blossom tree. "Whether it be Akane-san, Yayoi-san, or even Kunagisa-chan, if they were to play the two of us in rock-paper-scissors, they would only win one out of three times. I suppose Maki-san would be an exception there, but nevertheless."

"That's a pretty blunt way to put it."

Not to mention Shinya-san had just referred to his own employer as part of "that lot." I'm not saying they were at each other's throats or anything, but maybe Shinya-san and Kanami-san weren't quite the best of friends.

"Talent isn't such a big deal. In fact, I, for one, am glad I don't have any. Talent isn't worth spit."

"Why's that?"

"If you've got a talent, you've got to exert effort. Being ordinary is a breeze. Having nothing to master is an advantage, if you ask me," Shinya-san said with a cynical shrug. "I think we got a little off-topic. Anyway, I don't think it would be a terrible thing if you were able to extend your stay, if you ask me. And hey, just maybe this 'generalist' will beat us in rock-paper-scissors all three times."

"Well, I'll talk it over with Kunagisa… It would hardly be right for the tagalong to decide something like this on his own."

"I thought so," he said. "You're a lot like me," he said, looking me in the eye.

His gaze was deeply disconcerting. It gave me that uncomfortable feeling you get when you're being watched.

"Me and you? Alike? How do you mean? In what way?"

"Don't sound so happy about it. In particular, you're practically identical in holding the idea that you yourself are a part of the world."

Seemingly with no intention of explaining himself any further, he broke his gaze and looked back at Kanami-san. Predictably, Kanami-san was still staring at the cherry blossoms with complete concentration. She was surrounded by a sort of transcendence, as if just that one spot was isolated from the rest of the world. She had the air of being unapproachable, even sacred.

"So Kanami-san's been painting even since coming here?"

"Well, it's more like she came to this island to paint. That's really all she does, after all. I suppose you could say she lives to paint. Can you believe it?" He spoke with a tinge of frustration, but if you took his words at face value, it sounded like an incredibly enviable existence; a life where what you want to do and what you have to do are directly connected. It was a way of life I could never even hope for. I, who had discovered neither what I wanted nor what I had to do.

I noticed that Shinya-san was watching me with a wicked smile, like he had just remembered a bad prank. I recoiled a little. I was getting a bad feeling, like a premonition. And then Shinya-san, with a look on his face as if to say, "I've just had a revelation from God," clapped his hands deliberately.

"That's right! It's such a prime opportunity, so why don't you try modeling?" He set me aside as I stood at a loss for

words and unable to comprehend his, and faced Kanami-san. "Hey!" he called. "Kanami! This fella here says he wants to be your model!"

"Wait, Shinya-san!" Finally grasping the situation, I spun in front of him. "I can't just, I mean, give me a break!"

"Now, now, why are you so embarrassed? That hardly suits your character."

I don't think so. Asking Kanami-san to paint me? That was an incredibly intimidating idea. But Shinya-san blew off my protest with a simple "Now, now, don't be shy," and waited for an answer from Kanami-san.

Kanami-san adjusted the direction of her wheelchair and took a look at me. She scanned me up and down, from the tip of my head to the tips of my feet, observing me, assessing me, and said, "So you want me to paint you?" She sounded truly irritated.

This was a difficult question to answer. With someone as talented as Kanami-san, the simple act of hesitating would have been rude. I was weak in these situations. A real pushover. A nineteen-year-old boy who's spent his life going with the flow has not the power to alter the flow of a tale.

"Yes, absolutely, if you don't mind," I said.

Kanami-san simply looked disinterested. "Fine then. Come by the atelier this afternoon." she said, and swiveled her wheelchair back toward the cherry blossoms. She spoke with heartfelt apathy, but at least she had taken pity on me.

"Well, that's settled then. Are you free this afternoon?" Shinya-san said, strangely joyful.

I told him I was free and decided to get going before I got into any more trouble.

I returned to the mansion and visited Kunagisa's room once again. Kunagisa was just as I had left her, sitting in her revolving chair, her three PCs (I mean, two PCs and one workstation) in front of her. Right now she was focused on the workstation, and the two PCs had their power switched off.

"What were you up to, Tomo?"

No reply.

I went up to her from behind and tugged both her braids.

"Oww," she uttered in a strange voice, seeming to at last notice my presence. Without changing her position, she gaped at me in bewilderment. Surely I appeared upside down in her eyes.

"Yooo, Ii-chan. You're back from your walk."

"Yeah, well… Say, is that a Mac?"

The monitor on the workstation opposite Kunagisa was displaying some kind of Mac OS screen. As far as I had heard, Mac OS only worked on Macs.

"Yeah, it's Mac OS. Y'see, there are some applications that only run on Mac OS, so I'm running it on a virtual machine."

"Virtual machine?"

"Basically I'm making the workstation think there's a Mac inside it. In other words, I'm tricking the software. Of course Windows is in here, too. Most OS's are installed on this workstation, so it can do anything."

"Ah…"

I didn't really get it.

"This is a dumb question, but how are Mac and Windows different, anyway?"

She gave my truly amateurish question a moment's thought. "They're different because different people use them," she answered, with an air of precision.

"Well, yeah, that's true, but… Well, forget about that. So an OS is like the core software, right? I think that's right. So then it's like this computer has multiple personalities?"

"It's a strange metaphor, but you could say that."

"So then that PC, er, workstation, what's its *core* core OS? Like with multiple personalities you have a 'main' personality, right?"

"Geocide."

"Never heard of that. Is it like Unix?"

"That's *Unix*, with a 'yoo' sound. Come on, you studied abroad; you should know not to pronounce the alphabet like Romanized Japanese, Ii-chan. It makes you sound so stupid. Uh, well, it is compatible with Unix. But it's an original OS developed by a friend of yours truly.

"A friend…"

Kunagisa's friend. The only friend of Kunagisa's who could've developed an original operating system was someone from that "team." From that notorious "team."

Several years back, in the last century, during the time when the Japanese network was still underdeveloped, that group appeared. Or, no, "appeared" isn't the correct expression.

They never for an instant let their visage, nor their shadow, nor even their smell grace the public eye. They never announced their name; whatever name they had ever been known by had been applied by others. Whether you called them a virtual club, cyberterrorists, a crack unit, or a gang that made mountains out of molehills, it didn't matter to them, and they probably wouldn't respond.

They were completely peerless, species unknown. How many people were there, and just what types of people

comprised this "team"? These things were all shrouded in mystery.

And what did they do?

Everything.

They did everything, that was all you could say about it. They did so much of everything, there was nothing they didn't do. They wreaked havoc, havoc, and more havoc. I wasn't in Japan at the time, so I didn't get to see it firsthand, but they say it was such full-on, ludicrous havoc that it was practically refreshing, lending no hint as to their motives or aims. Beginning with pure hacking and cracking, they also had their hands in corporate advising and fixer fraud. It's also quietly speculated that, back then, they controlled a number of large corporations.

But you couldn't say they existed solely as a nuisance. For better or worse, it was thanks to them that the overall level of network technology improved drastically. You could even say they forced it. If you looked at it through a fine-toothed comb, sure there were losses, but in the big picture, the gains outweighed them tenfold.

But, of course, the fat cats upstairs saw them as little more than pesky, law-breaking criminals, a hacking, cracking eyesore. Thus the "team" went on, despised and pursued. But they were never caught, and exactly what they were doing was never brought to light. Then, sometime last year, suddenly and without anything in particular having happened, they were never heard from again. It was as though they had just burned out and vanished.

"Yo, what's wrong, Ii-chan? You're quiet all of a sudden."

"Nah… nothing."

She flipped her hair with a giggle.

"Yeah, I guess it's nothing…"

It was in that way that the "team" met what was, in a sense, an anticlimactic end. Who would believe the leader of that now-defunct team was this happy-go-lucky girl still in her teens? Exactly who in their right mind would believe something so nonsensical that it couldn't even be mistaken for a sick joke?

But if that wasn't the case, Kunagisa wouldn't have been invited to this genius-ridden island. Not as a communication and systems engineering specialist.

"How could I *not* have a complex, Shinya-san?"

"Huh? Did you say something?" Kunagisa glanced up at me for a moment.

"Just babbling," I said. "So 'Geocide,' doesn't that mean 'Earth murder'?"

"Yup. Of all the existing OS's, it's probably the most awesome. Geocide is number one. Even the RASIS is perfect."

"Sometimes I think you use those big words just to tick me off. What's a RASIS?"

"It's an acronym for reliability, availability, serviceability, integrity, security. But of course, that's in English," she said a bit irritably.

"Basically it means stability. Of course it requires a high-performance system, but it won't cause errors or anything like that. Man, that Atchan really is a genius. Hehehe."

"Atchan, huh? Sounds like you two are pretty close."

"Hmm? Jealous? Hmm? Hmm?" she said with a strangely pleased tone and naughty smirk. "It's okay. I like you best of all."

"Ah, right. 'Preciate that." I shrugged and tried to change the subject. "But if it's such an amazing OS, why not market it? If it sold like Windows, you'd make a fortune."

"No can do. You know about increasing returns, right? With an OS this different, we'd never catch up. Business goes beyond skill or talent."

Increasing returns. The law of economics that states "the more you have, the more you get," which does nothing for what you don't have. It had been awhile since I'd studied it, so I didn't remember it very clearly, but to put it simply, "once a significantly problematic difference has appeared, it is impossible to bury that difference." Whether it be in regards to skill or money, it seemed to make no difference.

"Besides, Atchan was satisfied just by creating Geocide. Atchan's a very self-satisfied person."

"Hey, yeah, must be very happy."

"Even if that wasn't the case, I don't think it would be possible to market it. Even though it's just core software, it requires some pretty outrageous specs. Seriously astronomical figures. Even my machine just barely cuts it."

"Hmm. How many gigs is your hard disk? About a hundred?"

"One hundred tera."

Different unit.

"Tera… that's the opposite of pico, so… a thousand times a gig?"

"Nope, 1,024 times."

Nitpicky chick.

"Man, I've never seen a hard disk like that."

"To be specific, it's not a hard disk; it's holographic memory. Unlike hard disks, which record data with magnets,

this records data onto a surface. It's capable of one tera per second rapid transfer. What you'd find on the market is, well, quite a bit slower. This is the kind of media they're using in the development of space technology."

She had those kinds of connections, too?

She belonged to an altogether dubious community.

"Of course, this goes for the machine's capacity as well, but if the motherboard specs aren't customized home brew as well, you're probably out of luck. Atchan just makes things without considering any of the surrounding circumstances, y'see. So they just end up like this. He doesn't try to suit things to other people."

"Motherboard home brew? There are people who do that?"

"Like yours truly, for one." She indicated herself with her thumb.

That's right. She was an engineer, after all. She must've been the culprit providing her "teammates" with the hardware and software that were to be their main "weapons." If you thought about it, it was fairly disturbing. It was one thing to develop a seemingly unmarketable OS like that, but to take it and build your own motherboard for it was just plain freakish.

"Mr. Earth Murder aside, haven't you ever considered selling this stuff? Like that motherboard you're so proud of?"

"I'm the self-satisfied type, too How 'bout you, Ii-chan?"

"Hmm, I wonder."

Regardless of talent or lack thereof, in the end all people are classified into two groups: those who pursue and those who create. My own case notwithstanding, Kunagisa was overwhelmingly the latter.

"Besides, as far as money is concerned, I've got plenty and

then some. I'm not thinking about making any more right now."

"Ah, no wonder."

That was true. Kunagisa wasn't in a position that demanded she immediately go into business. It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say she spent money like it was water. A nineteen-year-old occupying a high-class, two-floor condo in Shirosaki and spending money as fast as she could. I didn't know how many people out there had more money than Kunagisa, but surely no one individual spent as much.

Between the Akagami Foundation and the Kunagisa household, who held the greater power was beyond my realm of knowledge, but either way, they both possessed enough of a fortune to enjoy the best things in life and still get change back, that much was certain.

Speaking of which, Kunagisa resembled the master of this island, Iria, in that she, too, was semi-exiled from her family. Perhaps they were similar people. In the three days I had spent on the island, signs indeed pointed to the contrary, but, well, they were both eccentric, that was for sure. So much so that it would have been impossible for them to blend into any group or be members of any organization.

Surely that's how it was.

In which case, this island…

The meaning of this so-called island of wet crow's feathers…

Kunagisa returned to her typing.

"I'm gonna go have breakfast. What about you?"

"No, thanks. Not hungry. It's mating season. Ii-chan, go ahead on your own. Eat for me, too."

Gotcha, I said, and headed for the dining room.

3

Akane-san was in the dining room.

I tensed up.

She sat alone at the round dining table with her legs crossed in an elegant, somehow un-Japanese pose, having her breakfast. Or no, she had already finished breakfast and was enjoying an after-meal coffee.

"Oh! Good morning!" It was the bright and lively voice of Akari-san in the midst of cleaning the dining room. No, wait, it wasn't her. Akari-san never greeted me bright and lively. That wasn't the Akari-san I knew. Which meant…

"Hi, Hikari-san," I said, determining that it was Hikari-san. Evidently I was correct, as she then grinned at me and bowed.

Chiga Akari-san and Chiga Hikari-san.

They were sisters. Twins. To be sure, there was a third sister as well, their silent younger sister Teruko. Teruko apparently had poor eyesight and was recognizable by her glasses with their black lenses. Akari-san and Hikari-san, however, were perfectly identical, from the length of their hair to their clothes, to the point that they weren't just "similar," they were the same.

But unlike Akari-san, Hikari-san was an incredibly kind person. Even though I wasn't a true "guest," she treated me the same as everyone else.

"Breakfast? Wait one moment, please," she said, then spun around and hustled off to the kitchen. She must be so good at spinning because she's small, I thought.

With Hikari-san gone, I was suddenly left alone with Akane-san.

After a split-second's hesitation, I went ahead and took a seat near her. I thought to greet her, but she seemed completely immersed in thought, mumbling to herself in a semi-audible voice, not even looking in my direction. It was as though she hadn't noticed me. What in the world was she thinking about? I pricked my ears to listen in.

"Sente 9-6, pawn… Kote 8-4, pawn… Sente, same pawn… Kote 8-7, pawn… Sente 8-4, rook… Kote 2-6, pawn… Sente 3-2, silver general… Kote 9-5, pawn… Sente 4-4, bishop… Kote 5-9, gold general, take… Sente 2-7, knight…"

Meaning unknown.

That's what you get from one of the Seven Fools; even the things they mutter to themselves are different, I thought, thoroughly impressed. But listening closely, it sounded like she was reciting a shogi game record. Wow, blind shogi.

And by herself, no less.

Is this what she always did in the morning?

"Kote 2-3, pawn, checkmate, Sente forfeits," she said, and glanced over at me. "Ah, I was wondering who that was, and here it turned out to be you. Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Heh heh. Isn't shogi tough? The pieces move around a lot more than in chess. I was playing Kote just now. It was a close victory."

"Huh."

There's a Sente and Kote in single-player shogi? Maybe Akane-san was able to divide her mind like a dolphin. Yeah, it seemed likely for someone like her.

"Are you good at shogi, or chess, whichever?"

"I wouldn't say so, no."

"Hmm, is that so?"

"Reading other people's minds isn't my forte."

"Oh no? Hmm, I suppose not. You've got that kind of face," she nodded. "I saw you from the window a little earlier. Out for a morning walk, were you?"

"Yeah, a walk in the woods."

"Ah, a walk in the woods, how nice. Very nice. The phytoncide released by the trees creates a bactericidal effect and such."

What the hell?

In Houston, Texas, in America, there's a research facility called the ER3 System. There, brilliant minds from around America, nay, around the world, gather, and it is referred to as the ultimate bastion of learning, from economics to history, political science to cultural science, physics and advanced mathematics to biology, electronic and systems engineering, metapsychology, indeed, anything that could be called a field of study or research.

It's also known as the Comprehensive Research Center. It was a gathering place for those who loved learning and research above all else. A nest for those inhuman humans whose desire for knowledge exceeded even their natural, biological desires. An entirely nonprofit organization, they dared not sell their knowledge or research findings, and they were in a sense a closed and introverted sort of secretive organization.

There were only four basic rules:

Have no pride.

Have no principles.

Have no attachments.

No whining.

They were to unbegrudgingly cooperate with one another to the fullest of their ability, to never be unproductive, even if the world should perish, and to never quit halfway, come Hell or high water.

The ultimate destination for those who wanted to do research, who wanted to *know*, who *had* to know, with means and end in complete harmony, it was the ER3 System. The people gathered there ranged from highly esteemed college professors to "frontline" researchers and amateur academics, a truly pride-free assembly of all manner of individuals. Their reputation was seemingly so bizarre that the media ridiculed them as a "cultish pack of overeducated loonies."

But their research had yielded great rewards: the demystification of Dalevio nonlinear optics, the overwhelming advancement of volume hologram technology, and the establishment of the near-magical DOP as a sensory technology were all thanks to the ER3. Not the work of individuals, but rather team efforts, and nonprofit work at that, they declined all awards and other various honors, and thus had not come to draw much attention, but their reputation within the academic world was certainly high. It was a research center with a relatively brief history—not even a century old— but it was already globally networked.

And within this research center existed the transcendental group known as the Seven Fools. Seven individuals selected in turn by the selected "seven on the verge of the answers to the universe." They were the true "geniuses among geniuses."

One of these seven individuals was Sonoyama Akane-san.

She had beautiful black hair, cut ruler-precise to lend her an air of intellectualism. She was tall for a woman, with a stylishly slender build. There was no part of her that wasn't

overflowing with elegant femininity. She was a Japanese woman scholar of the highest order.

The ER3 System is relatively unknown in Japan. The fact that the ER3 itself is so exclusive is no doubt part of the reason for this, but the main reason is likely that the uncategorizable nature of the center doesn't fit with the Japanese way of doing things. But nevertheless, Akane-san had, as a pure and innocent Japanese woman (and in her twenties, no less) risen to the ranks of the ER3's Seven Fools. It would come as no surprise if one day she was a household name in Japan.

Now, this may all beg the question: if I'm just a "pure and innocent" Japanese person, too, how come I know so much? But there's no special reason, really. It's not that I'm particularly well informed, it's just that the ER3 and I have crossed paths a bit.

You see, in preparation for the long-term, ER3 System implements a study-abroad program to educate the youth of the next generation. For five years, beginning with my second year of junior high school, I participated in that program, so naturally I knew of Sonoyama Akane's reputation as one of the Seven Fools, as well as her "above the clouds" existence. And that's why I was so surprised to discover Akane-san here on this island. I'm not at all the type who surrenders unconditionally at the first sniff of authority or talent, but I can't help but be nervous. What exactly do you say to one of the Seven Fools?

I was sitting there, all clammed up, when Akane spoke to me. "By the way, that blue-haired girl—Kunagisa-chan, I mean."

"Ah. Yes?"

"She's just lovely. Last night I had her do some maintenance on my PC. She's incredibly skilled, isn't she? We have techies at ER3 as well, but I've never seen one with such… *mechanical* precision. She made it look like routine work. This may sound rude, but for a moment I wondered if she was really human. I was sure Iria-san would absolutely adore her."

"Ah, really? I hope she wasn't a bother or anything."

She let out a chuckle. "You sound like a baby stroller."

A baby stroller. Once again I had suffered an unfounded assessment. "You mean a baby*sitter*?"

"Well, they both mean the same thing, yes?"

"A stroller is a kind of carriage."

"Ah, right," she nodded.

For all her evident ability in math and science, it seemed Japanese was not Akane-san's forte.

"Well, either way. She was no bother at all."

Well, duh.

"Then again, she seemed a bit of the socially awkward type. I don't think she listens when people are talking. And as a result, my PC evolved about two generations."

"But that's actually the *improved* Kunagisa. She used to be terrible to talk to. Just starting and stopping whenever she felt like it. It was pretty rough for me."

"Hmm. If you want my opinion, I think there's a certain charm to her unapologeticness."

"Eh, I'm not sure I agree on that."

"Have it your way." Akane-san shrugged. "By the way, I also heard from her that you were in the ER program."

"Huh." That blabbermouth had let the cat out of the bag! I thought I told her to keep that quiet. Not that I wasn't fully aware there's no point trying to keep that girl quiet.

"You should've told me. We could've had quite a chat. I feel as if we've wasted two days. I don't suppose you were holding back by any chance? Please don't get me wrong, I'm not such a big deal."

"No, it's not that… I guess it was just hard to bring up. And also, even though I was in the program, I quit midway through."

The program is a ten-year study. I dropped out after my fifth year. From there I returned to Japan and reunited with Kunagisa. Luckily I was already qualified as a high school graduate from my second year in the program, so I was able to transfer directly to Kyoto Rokumeikan University.

"It's still a big deal. Regardless of what a sprain it became for you…"

"That's a 'strain.' "

"Regardless of what a strain it became for you, the ER program's entrance exam is a great obstacle to have overcome. You should have a little more pride about your accomplishments."

The ER program's entrance exam *was* unusually difficult. Even in the application guidebook it said, "There are no perks. This does not guarantee your future. No one will come to rescue you. We offer only an environment in which you may sate your intellectual curiosity," yet still elite candidates from around the world gathered to take the test. So it was true, merely passing the test was something to boast about.

But.

I hadn't completed the program.

"There's no point if you drop out halfway. End results are everything in this world."

Actually, I happen to think everything in this world *is* a result… Or are you one of those 'a genius is a genius is a genius' people?" She had the slightest bit of sarcasm in her tone. "A genius is not a rose. In Japan, you often see people who take pride simply in the effort they give, don't you? 'I've endured great hardships, regardless of the end results,' they say. They say there's merit in effort alone. I think that's a valid outlook. Saying 'I worked hard' is a fine conclusion in and of itself. What I have a problem with is lowlifes who spout absurdities like 'I could have done that if I wanted' or 'I couldn't do it because I just wasn't trying' or 'I said I can do it, but that doesn't mean I will.' That's all ridiculous. There really are all sorts of people in this world, huh?"

"I didn't try because I couldn't do it."

"Hmm, hehehe, you know, you've sort of got this world-weary quality about you."

"It's probably just modesty."

"Bingo."

The right part of her lip curled up in a half-smile and she produced a pack of cigarettes from her pocket. In graceful, fluid motions, she put one in her mouth and lit it.

"Wow, you smoke? I'm surprised."

"Are you the type who doesn't like women who smoke?"

"Well, no, not women particularly. Smoking is bad for your health, you know."

"Health is bad for your smoking, you know," she retorted, slowly exhaling smoke. There's that Seven Fools wit, I thought, but she smirked with embarrassment. "It's a stupid argument, huh? Don't mind me. It'd be awful if you ended up

thinking I was that kind of person," she said. "Shall we change the subject? You know, I was actually in Japan all the way through high school."

"Really?" I was a little surprised. But if you thought about it, it was really no mystery. "Which high school?"

"Just your average prefectural school. It wasn't particularly well-known. I was in the girls' karate club back then. I didn't like it at all at the time, but in retrospect it was really fun. Gee, that takes me back. It's already been more than ten years… The skirts back then were this long. I didn't have the best grades, but I was good in math and English. That's why I ended up at an overseas university. My family was very against it, but I defied them. After all, don't they say 'if you love someone, set them ablaze'?"

"No."

"Anyway, it was like that, so in the end I cut myself off from my family and crossed over to America on my own. It was a hell of a big move for someone like me back then."

And thus she ended up in the Seven Fools. Maybe Cinderella was in this story, too.

"So you do like math. I had a feeling."

"Well, you know, I don't dislike it. In high school I liked how there was always one concrete answer, no vague components, so math was all I did. I liked clear-cut things. But in college, at the ER3 System, I came to realize that wasn't necessarily the case. It's just like shogi or chess. You just have to get a checkmate, but there are an infinite number of ways to get there. I felt as if I had been swindled or something."

"Like when a lover shows an unfamiliar side of themselves to you?"

She laughed as if to say, "A romantic idea, but not exactly."

"But I was also a little touched, you know. In my high school days, I always figured math wouldn't be of any use once I got into the real world, but in fact there really are cases where you have to use calculus and cubic equations and such. You use factorials in everyday life. I was definitely touched by that fact."

"I understand." I nodded.

I really did.

She smiled in a satisfied way. "Are you a math person, too? On average, men are much more likely to be mathematically inclined than women. Because of the way their brains work."

"Is that so?"

"Well, based on statistical data."

"Sounds like sexist data to me."

Besides, statistical evidence is pretty unreliable. If you roll a die one hundred times and it lands on six every single time, that doesn't necessarily mean it'll be a six the next time, too. I told her this, but she protested.

"If it lands on six one hundred times in a row, it's a die that only lands on six. It's too significant a difference to be written off as a coincidence or leaning odds. Male-female statistics are kind of like that, too, though. Hehehe, so you're a feminist. Or are you just being polite around me? Well, unfortunately I'm not a feminist. Listening to talk about expanding women's rights and women's liberation makes me sick to my stomach. I mean, right? They're obviously spouting nonsense. Sure, it's a man's world, but it's not gender equality we need, it's equal opportunity to apply our abilities. Men and women are so different that you can practically call them genetically separate creatures. So I believe they have separate roles. Of course,

that rests on the major assumption that your role and what you want to do are separate, and the minor assumption that if you have to choose between the two, what you want to do should come first. Ah, and maybe the medium-sized assumption that you can do what you want to do first. But saying you can't do anything sounds like a convenient excuse to me."

"There's also the factor of environment."

"Environment, huh? But was there ever an age when women were forbidden from writing, or from sculpting? Regarding recent trends, I've become more inclined to sympathize with men. I feel as if they're closer to my own point of view, but also, until the modern day, the workplace was always exclusively man's domain, right? So it's no wonder they got angry when women wanted to butt in."

"They were just righting a wrong. That's just tough luck for the men." I wondered why I had to take the feminist stance.

"Hmm," she nodded. "Maybe you're right. I don't really know. But I can understand why women get angry at men, too. Even though they're just carrying out their roles and we're just carrying out ours, they still act all big about it and put on airs. It's no wonder women get angry. Just so long as they don't try to mix me up into anything. I guess what I truly want is for feminists to just do it away from me. Whatever the case may be, women are inherently a boring breed. Just like you men. Hmm, come to think of it, there were more men than women at ER3, too. Within the Seven Fools, five were men."

"Increasing returns, huh?"

"Eh?" She seemed taken aback. I'm afraid I don't know that word. What is it, some kind of dieting thing or something?"

"It means Beta lost to VHS."

"Ah, you mean the bias that occurs in economics. That's right, to return a once male-biased world to equilibrium, you'd have to go through quite a bit of hardship. Really, there wouldn't be any problems if men and women weren't always acting jealous of each other. But nobody gets it, do they? And yet they claim there's no difference between separation and discrimination."

"You know, Akane-san, coming from you this all sounds convincing. I guess you must be going through 'quite a bit of hardship' yourself."

"Never," she said flatly. "I just make a little effort."

It was a loaded statement.

Suddenly I recalled something I had wanted to ask someone ever since I first learned of the Seven Fools' existence at ER3.

"Say, who's the number one smartest person in the entire ER3 system?"

In other words, who was the smartest person in the world? Akane-san answered with little deliberation.

"Number two is Froilein Love."

"And number one?"

"Come on, kid, you expect me to list *everyone*?"

Huh.

"Kidding, kidding. Hmm, to answer your question seriously, the person I respect the most, or in other words the person I place above myself *and* all others, is probably Assistant Professor Hewlett. He is number one for sure."

Almost unspeakably accomplished, he was the single greatest mind of the last century, and probably this one as well. The first and probably last man to *master* every subject

when he was still in his single digits. Granted special criminal immunity by the president, he used his superior intellect to serve the good of the nation.

If Akane-san was like a god to me, Assistant Professor Hewlett was the very fabric of the universe.

"If he had been a woman, he probably would've changed history," she said, looking off into the distance. It was a curious look of admiration.

"Sorry for the wait!" With expert timing, Hikari-san appeared, pushing a cart. On top of it sat my breakfast. With experienced hands, she placed it in front of me, followed by a knife and fork on either side. "Please take your time," she said with a bow and radiant smile, and then went off somewhere once more. It seemed she still had lots of work to do.

Nine pieces of deep-fried risotto balls on lettuce. Fish soup, salad, and a sandwich made with Italian bread. Plus coffee.

"That Sashirono-san is hot stuff, huh?" Akane-san muttered, eyeing my meal.

Sashirono Yayoi.

She ran the mansion's kitchen, but she wasn't an employee. Indeed, she was one of the geniuses who had been invited to the island. Having already been here for over a year, at this point she was the longest-running guest. There was no doubt that many of the elite visitors to the island had come in hopes of trying her cuisine.

Officially, her specialty was Western cuisine, but she could just as skillfully do any other type, whether it be Chinese, Japanese, or what have you. She was a cooking master with whom no one in the culinary world wasn't familiar—or so went the tales about her. Personally, I was just as ignorant about cooking as I was about art and academics, so I had sadly

not even heard of Yayoi-san until visiting the island, but having the privilege to try her dishes three times a day *plus* between-meal snacks, even I came to know of her extraordinary culinary prowess.

The typical image that accompanied a first name like "Yayoi" is either that of a stuck-up know-it-all or a short, spunky girl, but this Yayoi-san fit neither description, instead turning out to be a boisterous and lively woman with short hair. With a polite manner about her, she was the unarrogant type, despite being called a genius. She was also probably the only down-to-earth person on the whole island besides me. Likewise, she was the second-most pleasant person to talk to. Incidentally, Hikari-san was first. Nah, I'm just babbling.

Word had it that Yayoi-san possessed some power that allowed her to make any food better than any other cook, but just what was it? I was curious to know, but had yet to inquire. She spent most of the day in the kitchen (I think that's what you call a shut-in) so opportunities to speak with her were rare.

I noticed that Akane-san was hungrily eyeing my risotto balls. After a moment of my refusing to speak up, she transferred her gaze to me. Something about her eyes was slightly different from before. Like those of a carnivore hunting wild game.

"Have you ever heard that people originally didn't acknowledge any numbers past seven?"

"Well, I…"

Apparently, all numbers past seven were simply thought of as "a lot." I had also heard in my program training that this was the fundamental reason why the "Fools" were limited to seven people.

"Yeah, so just looking at things objectively, if your nine risotto balls turned into eight, I don't think it would be such a great loss."

"And?"

"You're a sharp guy, huh? A good match for a girl like Kunagisa."

It's not like that between us."

"Don't change the subject. Are you trying to get *me* to kowtow to *you*? Fine. Sashirono-san's risotto balls are delicious, so gimme one. You happy?"

I slid my plate to her without saying anything.

Akane-san began to gleefully pop down the risotto balls, one after another. Before you knew it, they were all gone. Apparently by "one" she meant "one plate."

Well, I was never one to eat a whole lot in the morning anyway. I was supposed to eat for Kunagisa, too, but it was awfully cruel of her to leave that to me.

Switching channels, I made my way to the sandwich and salad. Not to be too generic, it was really good. If you said this was the only kind of food that was served at the island (and all of it free, no less), no genius would decline. Surprisingly, even Akane-san was evidently in that boat.

"Now then, to get back to the subject you're so slyly avoiding," she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin, "if it's 'not like that' between you two, just what is your relationship? If you were just friends, you wouldn't have come to this island together. You have school to worry about."

Indeed, by coming to the island I had missed every day of class since the school entrance ceremony. Incidentally, I also missed the entrance ceremony. In other words, well, yeah.

"I met her before I was in the program. So there's a blank of five years."

"Mmm, and when you got back she turned out to be a cyberterrorist, huh? That's a sordid little tale."

Indeed.

I saw it coming even when we were thirteen years old. Nevertheless, reuniting with her after my five years of study abroad, I was honestly surprised at how little had changed from the old days. Anyone would be surprised to suddenly return to their early teens. Of course, that was just how things seemed. In reality, she had become much more human in terms of personality.

Our relationship.

Asked flat out, it was a tough question to answer.

Kunagisa needed me—that much I knew. However, it didn't really have to be me. It would be extremely difficult to explain the circumstances that surrounded us. To do so, I'd have to explain a lot about Kunagisa herself, and I didn't especially want to do that.

"Mmm," Akane-san nodded.

"I haven't talked with Kunagisa-chan all that much, but it seems to me she has too many shortcomings to go through everyday life… Hmm, I guess I shouldn't say shortcomings. It's not like she's defective. But her focus is just so skewed. It reminds me of my friend whose kid is a savant."

Savant—in French, it means a person with wisdom. I was aware that Kunagisa, too, used to be called a savant. I probably knew too much about her.

"So she probably really does need someone like you looking after her. There's no doubt about that. But I mean, how does that make you feel?"

I didn't have an answer.

"It seems like you two have something of a codependent existence," Akane-san continued.

"Codependent existence?"

She tilted her head as if to say, "Haven't you heard the word?"

"It's a symptom of addiction that affects human relationships. Like, for example, let's say there's a recovering alcoholic who has a caretaker by his side. He needs that caretaker, and the caretaker devotedly looks after him. But when that devotion goes to extremes, it's a sign of codependency. They get drunk on serving. You even see mild cases of it in romantic couples. Needless to say, it's not a good thing. You end up putting each other to waste. I'm not going to say you two are like that, but you might want to take care."

"Sure."

"Few things are as meaningless as prolonging a failed relationship. But still, I'm full of nothing but awe for Kunagisa-chan's talents. Even at ER3 they're using software that she created. Er, 'they' created, rather. But certainly I never imagined I would meet her in a place like this."

"Why are you on this island anyway?"

It wasn't like the Seven Fools had the emptiest schedules in the world.

"No real reason," she said after a few moments' silence. It was a strangely blunt response, and it bothered me a little. "But more important, even if you're not the best player, you at least know the rules to shogi and chess, right? Why don't we have a game while we reminisce a little more about ER3?"

"Sure."

A shogi challenge with one of the Seven Fools.

Sounded interesting.

"But not without looking. My memory is famously bad." Not the greatest reputation to have, if I do say so myself. "If we can change locations, I'm in."

"I've got a board in my room. It was the first thing I bought when I got back to Japan. Hmm, I've actually got some work to do this morning. How's this afternoon?"

"Sounds good… Ah wait, I can't. I've already got something."

"Oh? Meeting up with Kunagisa-chan or something, huh? Well, if that's the case, what can you do."

"No, with Kanami-san."

Boom.

Akane-san's expression grew unusually stern.

Damn it, I'd forgotten. When I had first arrived on the island, Hikari-san had been kind enough to let me know that Akane-san and Kanami-san were on catastrophically bad terms, but because of my famously bad memory I had forgotten.

"Hmph. We're pals, so I'll give you a bit of advice. You shouldn't hang around with someone with such a vulgar occupation. Lowering oneself like that is stupid, you know?"

"Akane-san, you really hate Kanami-san, don't you?"

"No. There's no reason for me to embrace any feelings of like or dislike toward that woman. But artists truly are a despicable race. Hmph, *seriously*!" She banged her hand on the table. "There's nothing I hate more than painters. They're the most inferior race in existence. Compared to them, thieves anti rapists look like Jesus. All they do is dab a little bit of paint on something with a little brush and they think they're

so damn great. A little red, a little blue, and *poof*, it's a 'masterpiece'! Hah! Anybody can do it!"

It was as if she had turned into another person. It was such an abrupt transformation, it almost made you wonder if a painter had once stolen her research materials or something.

"Ah, sorry," she said, returning to her normal self upon noticing my stunned expression. "I guess I got carried away. Not that I'm going to take any of that back, but I know it's no fun listening to someone gripe about someone else. I think I'm going to go cool off," she said, her words racing, then helped herself to the rest of my coffee and made for the door. It seemed she was regretting losing her head like that. Even if she wasn't going to take it back.

Once I was alone, I let out a sigh.

Man, I had been nervous. I'm not that used to holding conversations with people in the first place, much less Sonoyama Akane of the ER3 Seven Fools. No sweat, right?

Well, aside from that blunder at the very end, we were actually able to hold a much more natural conversation than I would've imagined, so I guess I should've been happy. And maybe, sometime in the next four days, I would get to have that game of shogi with her.

I let out another sigh, but there was no time to snooze. Having finished breakfast, I decided to pay yet another visit to Kunagisa's room, but not a second later, Maki-san appeared in mid-yawn. Fully dressed in outdoor gear, which she complemented with a high ponytail, she looked very much like she had come to this island on vacation.

"Ba baya baya baya baya bahhh," she hummed cheerfully as she strolled over and took a seat by me.

"Good morning."

"Hello."

"No no no, you gotta say 'good morning' when you greet someone in the morning. Ah, wait, is it not still morning? You've been up since six, so it probably feels pretty late to you, wow. As for me, I have extraordinarily low blood pressure, so I can't be like you," she said with another big yawn. I gave the usual nod and "yup" combo. There was no point in asking how she knew when I woke up.

I was once again nervous, this time in an entirely different way than when I was with Akane-san.

Himena Maki-san.

Of course she wasn't just here for the surfing. There was a solid reason for her being on this island.

Maki-san's occupation was fortune-telling. Just as Kanami-san was a painting genius and Akane-san was an academic genius, Maki-san was known as a genius in the world of fortune-telling.

Now that's a real talent, huh? I thought to myself.

That aside, I wasn't a big fan of Maki-san.

We had had a bad first impression of each other.

"You're a fortune-teller? I've never met one of those before. So how does *my* fortune look?"

It's not like I actually cared all that much about my fortune. I just figured that since she was a fortune-teller, it was the socially appropriate thing to say. Normally any person would be thrilled to have the conversation turn to their field of expertise. As Churchill once said, "I want to talk about what I know, but people only ask me about what I don't." I just didn't want to be one of those "people."

That's just an excuse though.

But after hearing my question, Maki-san sneered, and said, "Well, give me your year, month, and date of birth; your blood type; and the name of your favorite movie actor." I answered, but all the while wondering what possible connection my favorite actor could have to my fortune, birthday and blood type aside. In any case, I had forgotten my blood type, and I didn't really know a lot of movie actors, for that matter, so I just made some answers up.

"Okay, I see. Then, take this," Maki-san said, producing a slip of paper from her pocket and handing it to me. And with that, she left.

I opened the paper fortune and took a look. My date of birth along with the blood type and actor I had just given were inscribed on it in Mincho font.

"You were tricking me, weren't you?"

After that, I went to check with Kunagisa about it. "I figure it's some worn-out magic trick where the pocket has hidden slips of paper with random numbers written on them or something," I said.

"Mmm-mmm." Kunagisa shook her head. "No way. That might work for playing cards, but for something like this there would have to be too many. Plus, she would've had to look you up beforehand. It's not like she could've guessed you would lie about your blood type and favorite actor."

And then Kunagisa gave me the Himena Maki lecture. It seemed that although uneducated folks like myself hadn't heard of her, Maki-san had actually made quite a name for herself in the fortune-telling world. She didn't do those supposedly therapeutic horoscope-style "cold readings" like you see in magazines, but rather used her skills to advise

bigwig politicians and corporate clients, never making much of a spectacle of herself.

Himena Maki, master fortune-teller.

"Also known as a good self-promoter," I commented.

Kunagisa seemed to think of her that way, too.

Her catchphrase for her: "The telepath who knows the past, the future, human beings, the world, and all inside it."

"What's a telepath?"

"She's super-powered," she said aloofly. "She's got extrasensory perception."

"Huh?"

"ESP. Super abilities are divided into the two categories of ESP and PK. What Maki-chan's got is ESP. Retrocognition, precognition, and telepathy. In translation, retrocognition means she can see the past. Precognition means she knows the future. Telepathy means she can read your psyche."

"Wait a sec, I don't follow. Slow down. Tomo, Maki-san *is* a fortune-teller, right?"

"Occupationally, yes. Using her special abilities. That's all. Being able to run fast isn't an occupation, right? But being an athlete is. Being good with your hands isn't an occupation, right? But being a craftsman is. Special abilities are just abilities, but fortune-telling is an occupation."

"Ah…" I nodded. "So Maki-san…"

"Yep. She read your thoughts in advance, even before she asked you those questions." She flashed a bright smile.

• • •

"Superpowers, huh?" I muttered softly so as not to be heard by Maki-san, now sitting next to me in the dining room. I recalled my conversation with Kunagisa. Her previous explanation had sounded somewhat convincing, to be sure, but…

Now, sitting next to this sleepy-eyed, spacey woman, it was really hard to imagine she was a fortune-teller. She just seemed like some drowsy chick with low blood pressure.

"I told you I'm a fortune-teller, but you seem to be dissatisfied," she said, suddenly shifting her glance toward me. For some reason, she seemed to be picking on me a little ever since our first encounter. "Perhaps you'd like me to go walking around with a black hood and crystal ball. Should I speak to you in vague, cryptic terms about your impending doom? You just take everything at face value, don't you?"

"I don't think that's the case."

"Yeah, I'll bet. I know all about it," she replied, shaking her head. "Well, whatever. You don't matter anyway."

"I don't matter?"

"Yup. You're the Japanese representative of things that don't matter."

In other words, the most unimportant guy in Japan. It was a terrible thing to hear.

"But I'll give you one piece of advice out of the kindness of my heart. Your impression of me is quite out of line. And that's not all. The ideas you hold about the residents of this island are all out of line. And that includes Kunagisa-chan. More important, it looks like you intentionally adjust all your beliefs when you're talking to other people. That's surely a

very comfortable way to live, but I wouldn't call it a wise one," she rattled off at me as she let out another catlike yawn. For the last two days, I had gotten the same earful of gripes every time we met. And I couldn't say she was all that far off the mark, either. Her remarks were so accurate, I wondered if she really was using telepathy.

I'll be honest: I found her really creepy.

"Oh, I'm sorry for being creepy."

With that said, she stormed off in the direction of the kitchen, presumably to get her breakfast.

4

So as not to let this opportunity slip through my fingers, I immediately made my way out of the dining room and back to Kunagisa's room. As I expected, she was still face-to-face with her workstation. It didn't seem right to be such a shut-in while also being a guest in another person's home, but I guess we just had different values.

Kunagisa looked back at me.

"Oooh, Ii-chan. Welcome back. How was it? Did you run into anyone?"

"Almost everyone. Today I've seen everyone except Teruko-san and Iria-san. Oh yeah, Yayoi-san, too."

But having eaten her food, I felt as if I had met her.

"Hmm, well, that's almost perfect."

"What is?"

"Your score in the Meeting Everyone on Wet Crow's Feather Island by Mid-Morning Contest."

What a crappy-sounding contest.

But anyway.

There were currently twelve people on the island. Artist Ibuki Kanami-san, chef Sashirono Yayoi-san, Sonoyama Akane of the Seven Fools, fortune-teller Himena Maki-san, and engineer Kunagisa Tomo. Then there was Sakaki Shinya and myself, the tagalongs. Then there were the original residents of the island, starting with Akagami Iria, who owned the island and the mansion, plus head maid Handa Rei-san and the three all-purpose maids, Chiga Akari-san, Chiga Hikari-san, and Chiga Teruko-san. A total of twelve people.

In an ordinary-sized house, things would've already gotten quite cramped, but in this oversized palace, there was still an excess of space.

That's when I remembered.

"Hey, Kunagisa. How long were you planning to be here again?"

"Another four days. So for a week, yeah?"

"Shinya-san was asking me about something." I explained to her what Shinya-san had talked to me about. The rumor about Iria-san's favorite jack-of-all-trades coming to town. Kunagisa, however, seemed uninterested, tuning out the majority of my story.

"Is that really important? It's all really vague information, so it's hard to say. but I don't think we really need to meet this person. I didn't really come here to meet any geniuses, and I'm not really interested."

"Well, yeah, but, hey, speaking of that, I've been meaning to ask for a while, why exactly *did* you come here? If you're not interested in that kind of thing, what were you so interested in?"

I couldn't figure why someone who hated leaving the house as much as Kunagisa did would accept an invitation like

this. She tilted her head a bit, and after a moment's pause said, "Eh, just 'cuz." A nonanswer. "There's no particular reason, really. Or are you the type of guy who always needs there to be one for everything?"

I shrugged.

No way.

"As long as there's a network, it doesn't really matter where I am. Home is the best in the end, though," she said in spite of still being on vacation.

Well, whatever. She was just being her usual whimsical self. I didn't particularly mind, and it wasn't like I was supposed to, either. I sprawled myself out on the pure white carpet and stared up at the chandelier on the ceiling. Man, what an unrealistic scene. Then again, if you asked me what would be a realistic scene, I wouldn't know what to say.

Kunagisa looked at me sprawled on the floor. "Ii-chan, I don't suppose you're bored?"

"I'm bored with life."

"Y'know, that's really unattractive."

Huh.

She laid it right out for me.

"If you're free, why not read a book? I brought a few."

"A book, huh? Whatcha got?"

"Um, a Japanese-English dictionary, the Statute Books, and a modern Japanese dictionary."

"Man, bring that stuff in digital form."

Who has fun reading that kind of stuff?

Oh, right. She does.

Half giving up and half fed up, I rolled over.

"Huh? Ii-chan, your watch is broken, isn't it?"

"Eh?"

I took a look at my watch. That's right. Come to think of it, I had meant to ask her to fix it. After running into so many people this morning, I'd forgotten all about it.

"Lemme see. I'll fix it for you."

"Here. Maybe the battery's dead."

"Hmm…" She held the watch up to the light. "Nope, something else is wrong. Did you bump it into something hard? Anyway, I think it'll be a quick fix. But you know, wristwatches have become sort of an anachronism these days. Most people just get by with their cell phone. Huh? Speaking of which, where's yours?"

"I left it at home."

"You should bring it. That's what makes it a *mobile* phone."

"But what if I dropped it?"

"Well, I guess, but—"

"And it would be out of service here anyway. It would take a phone like yours to get any signal here."

Kunagisa uses a phone that receives signals from relay satellites anywhere in the world. Even on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere, her phone didn't know the meaning of the phrase "out of service."

Of course, it didn't come cheap. It was a terrible waste of money for an antisocialite like Kunagisa, but she wasn't the type to give much thought to such matters.

"Hmm, maybe so. Well, it's not like being an anachronism is a bad thing."

She narrowed her big eyes and placed my watch next to the computer rack.

Just then there was a knock at the door. Kunagisa showed no response whatsoever, so I had no choice but to open it

myself. The visitor was none other than Hikari-san, cleaning supplies in tow.

"Hello. Thanks so much." I invited her in.

"Yo, Hikari-chan, ciaooo!" Kunagisa welcomed her with a full-faced grin. Hikari-san responded in likewise fashion. For some reason these two girls were strangely friendly with each other. They just plain got along. It's a rare thing for someone to be able to become so friendly with Kunagisa in such a short period of time, so I couldn't help but be a little surprised.

"What are you up to, Tomo-san?"

"I'm making some game software right now. I'm creating an application that converts text to music. I figured I'd give it to Iria-san as a memento of my visit."

"What kind of game is that?" I said.

"Well, shall I explain? Okay, um, okay, so, Ii-chan, what's the longest book you've ever read?"

"I quit halfway through *The Tale of Genji* and *Don Quixote*, so… Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Man, that was long."

"Okay. So let's say you converted that whole book into a text document, whether by using a scanner or by typing it all by hand. Then you do a digital-to-analog conversion, like where 'i' is 'do,' 'ro' is 're,' 'ha' is 'me,' and so on. If you do that, you end up with the '*War and Peace Song*.' For that much text, it would probably come out to around… an hour, maybe? Of course, in reality it's more complicated than that. The code conversions and sessions and everything have to be wholly consistent. But still, it turns books into music. Sounds fun, right?"

"Well, definitely sounds interesting, anyway. What programming language are you using? VB? C?"

"Machine language."

An extremely basic-level coding language. I didn't think anybody used that kind of language these days.

"Man, it's like you can communicate with the machine like it's just some close buddy of yours."

"Heh heh heh." she laughed, just a little boastfully.

Seemingly even more ignorant than I about computers, Hikari-san wore an inscrutable expression, not revealing whether she was following the conversation, and said nothing more than "Wow."

"Seriously," I said. "But what's actually fun about this game? I guess I don't really get it."

"Making it is fun."

It was a solid reason. I couldn't object.

Hikari-san listened with apparent interest, but then seemed to remember something. "Oh, right." She turned to me. "Would it be all right if I cleaned your room later on? I stopped by the storeroom a little earlier, but you were out."

"Sure, no problem."

I sure didn't know what cleaning there was to be done in that room, though. Hikari-san politely thanked me and resumed cleaning Kunagisa's room.

After a single sweep of the room, she stopped and crouched to the floor with a sigh.

"I apologize. I'm just… a little exhausted."

"Why not take a break?"

"No, I'll be fine. Rei-san would get mad anyway. I've said it before, but she's so strict. I'll be fine. I'm peppy. That's my one positive trait. I'm fine. Please forgive me for causing you concern," she said firmly, then exited the room.

I let out a sigh. "Sure seems to have it tough. Maybe it's just my assumption, but seeing her like that, it seems as if she's bearing an awfully big load on her own."

"Do you feel a little like you're watching yourself?"

"It's not like that, but y'know, I do feel a bit of sympathy for her." She did seem to be miserable, after all. Rei-san and Akari-san seemed to have a distinct division in their heads that this was just "work," but Hikari-san didn't seem to be able to mentally process it that way. It was like the concept of work hadn't been figured into her internal "circuit." Perhaps there were circumstances surrounding that.

As for the other maid, Teruko-san, I wasn't sure *what* she was thinking, so I couldn't comment.

"Everybody's suffering through something, Ii-chan," Kunagisa said knowingly. "Everybody knows hardship, or even if they don't, they're at least exerting effort somewhere. Hikari-san, your pal Nao-kun, Akane-chan—everyone. If there's anyone who lives without suffering or exerting effort, it's probably me."

5

After having lunch, I headed for the atelier as promised. Kunagisa claimed, as usual, not to be hungry and headed to bed shortly after noon. She was a chronically sleep-deprived little techie.

"Wake me for din-din, please. I hafta see Iria-chan and stuff," she said.

I knocked on the atelier door, waited for a response, then turned the knob.

The floors were uncarpeted hardwood. In some ways it reminded me of the art room in my elementary school, except of course that this room wasn't lined with scarred-up desks and there weren't any fake-looking plaster sculptures. It wasn't as big either. The total area of the atelier was probably around half the size of the room Kunagisa was staying in.

"Welcome. Take a seat over there," Kanami-san said, after briefly staring at me in cold silence. Shinya-san must have been in his room or someplace, as Kanami-san was the only person there. I walked past a shelf containing paint and paint supplies and took a seat as told.

I faced Kanami-san. "Thanks for doing this."

I couldn't deny that she was a pretty woman. With blond hair and blue eyes, she was like one of those "well-bred young ladies" you see in old films. An intellectual, at that. And even more, she had artistic talent. It was like she had God's favor.

No, maybe I can't say that.

She had bad legs, and until a few years ago, she couldn't even see. I guess it would be pretty damn low of me in all my able-bodied good fortune to gripe. But on the other hand, Kanami-san herself didn't seem to view her condition as a handicap or disability.

"God is fair. If I had been able-bodied, it would've conversely been unfair to ordinary people." "Legs are just a decoration." "Even when I gained my eyesight, my world didn't really change. The world looked just as I'd thought. Natural selection and fate have unusually bad taste."

All of these are quotes from Kanami-san's art books.

Kanami-san sat in a round, wooden chair just like the one I was sitting in. She was in a dress, so it looked mildly uncomfortable, I noticed.

"Kanami-san, is that what you wear when you're painting?"

"Are you doubting my fashion sense?"

Her face grew subtly more stern. It seemed that this was no joke. She was actually miffed. I scrambled to weasel my way out.

"No no, I didn't mean that. I was just thinking your clothes might get dirty."

"I don't go and change my clothes every time I paint something. Up to now, I've never dirtied my clothes even *once* while painting. I'm not an idiot."

"Oh, I see."

I guess it was like being an expert calligrapher. In retrospect, getting paint on your clothes is probably a pretty amateur blunder. To Kanami-san, one of the top artists in the entire world, the mere suggestion was probably rude.

I shrugged.

"But is it really okay painting someone like me?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped with the same stern expression. She seemed to be in a pretty awful mood. Or no, maybe this was her default setting.

"Er, no, it's just that, won't it decrease your worth as an artist?"

Like, for example, it was probably safe to say that Kunagisa had technological skill like no one else in the world. However, she only ever used that technology for fun, so the number of people who actually acknowledged her as amazing and brilliant was extremely small.

"Authority comes from results. Not doing and not being able to do are the same thing."

Apparently that was Kunagisa's case.

I figured it was the same with painters. If you just choose your subjects randomly and mess around all the time, it's hard to get other people to acknowledge your worth as an artist.

But Kanami-san renounced my ideas.

"Didn't I just tell you I'm not an idiot? Do you have a brain at all? I don't go around choosing subjects. You know, if you keep your mouth shut, people won't see how stupid you are, so why don't you do just that?"

My heart sank.

"I just… I *hate* that kind of thinking. It makes me want to puke. 'Oh, there were no good subjects to paint.' 'My model was no good.' 'The environment was all wrong.' 'That's not the kind of subject I should be painting.' And it's not just with painters either. Even you know people who say obnoxiously egotistical things like 'Oh, this isn't what I want to do' or 'Oh, I don't know what I want to do,' right?"

"Yeah, I do."

Yeah, myself.

"For god's sakes," she sighed. "I *hate* people who bitch about what they want and don't want to do, putting their own ineptitude on a pedestal. I want to tell them to stop living like pricks. I don't mean they should all die, but they should be more humble. Just paint anything and stop whining all the time. I don't care if it's some boring jerk or a pile of bug guts. I'd turn it into gorgeous art."

Regardless of how sweet and pretty she looked, she sure was full of herself. She was so uncompromising that she didn't even forgive others who compromised.

Being compared to a pile of bug guts wasn't my favorite thing in the world, but if she could paint that, surely she could

paint me. It seemed that making any further thoughtful comments would just end badly, so I decided to stay quiet.

I noticed that behind Kanami-san was a canvas. An underangle view of the cherry blossom tree was drawn on it in pencil. The one she had been looking at this morning with Shinya-san.

It was so precisely drawn, it was like a monochrome photograph. With about ten million pixels. No, that's dumb. There was no need to cheapen such an intricate drawing with that kind of metaphor.

I pointed to the picture. "When did you draw that?"

"This morning. Got a problem?"

It was early morning when she was observing the tree. That was about five hours earlier. In other words, she had drawn this amazingly detailed picture in a mere five hours. A drawing like this should've taken *at least* a week to complete. Without thinking, I shot her a skeptical expression. She grimaced back at me audaciously.

"Only idiots spend three or four months doing something you can finish in a week. Idiots or lazy people. And since I'm neither, I did this picture in three hours. It doesn't take me any longer than that."

Huh.

Being the pure embodiment of laziness myself, this was painful to hear. It stung. I wished Kunagisa could've heard it, too.

"Right? Even you have to agree a little, too, right?" she said in a cruel tone, demanding my concurrence. I couldn't help but feel as if she were attacking me with a direct insult. And I doubt that was just a false impression.

"Uh, no, well, I mean… yeah. Er, but anyway, you're really good."

"Yeah, sure," she answered, completely uninterested in my generic praise. It really was an exceedingly bland comment for me to make, in retrospect. *You're really good.* It sounds like something a five-year-old would say.

"Uh, so, Kanami-san, you do detail pictures?"

"I do all kinds of pictures. Didn't you know?"

Oh yeah, I'd put my toot in my mouth again. The woman before my eyes was Ibuki Kanami-san, the woman artist who denied having any style and took no stance. Whether it be detailed or abstract, there was no picture she couldn't or wouldn't paint.

She squinted just one eye at me. "I don't get hung up on one style. It's not a rule set in stone, but getting too hung up is just plain crazy. It's nuts. If there's one thing in life I want to do as I please, it's painting."

"You may be right, huh?" Unable to argue or concur, I settled with a simple nod. Perhaps able to see through me, she returned my nod with a contemptuous sneer.

"Hey, have you ever seen my art?"

"Well, a few times in some of your art books. But owing to my ignorance, this is the first time I've seen it directly."

"Hmm, and what did you think of it? Not the art book stuff, but that cherry blossom one."

To me, Kanami-san's question was a bit of a surprise. I never figured that so-called geniuses cared much about other people's opinions of them. Starting with Sonoyama Akane-san, none of the people at ER3, including that deplorable group of study-abroad participants, had any vanity or desire

for glory, and nobody cared about how they looked in other people's eyes.

"I know my worth better than anyone else does. I don't need to sit here and be evaluated by a bunch of brainless slackers." This was their unanimous way of thinking. Probably why I wasn't a big fan of theirs.

"Um," I said, groping for an answer, "well, it's a very pretty picture."

"A pretty picture, huh?" she repeated my line. "You know, there's no need to try and flatter me. I won't get mad."

"Well, it's just that I don't really have much judgment or a critical eye for this kind of thing. But yeah, I think it's a pretty picture."

"Hmm… pretty?"

She wore an utterly disappointed expression as she stared at her canvas. She muttered something to herself.

"Pretty… prettyprettypretty. That's not the kind of compliment you give to art."

"Eh?"

"Hmm, you don't get it, huh? Damn, I really don't want to do this. What a waste."

She let out a heavy sigh, hunched over a bit, and picked up the canvas.

She lifted it up over her head…

…and smashed it into the hardwood floor.

The sound of splintering wood.

Of course, it wasn't the floor that had broken.

"Hey, wh-what are you doing?"

"As you can see, I'm disposing of my screwup. Ah, why did it have to come to this?"

That decidedly should've been my line. She stared down at the shattered remains of her canvas, a sorrowful expression on her face, and let out another sigh.

"Geez, it looked like it would've been worth about twenty million one day."

"Twenty million yen?"

"Twenty million dollars."

Different unit.

"Of course, we're talking about several decades later."

"Artists can be pretty reckless sometimes, huh?"

I couldn't help but feel guilty that my crappy comments had invited this disaster.

"You shouldn't feel like you did something wrong. This is my responsibility. I'm not the kind of imbecile who pushes her own responsibilities onto other people."

"But I'm just an amateur. You didn't have to do something like that based on the opinion of an amateur."

"It's not art if you get to pick who looks at it," she insisted.

So that's how it was.

I could understand that.

Her words and her manner were filled to the brim with spitefulness, but to be sure, this woman was an artist to the bone.

"But it was so realistic, it was just like a photograph."

"That's not a compliment either, you know. Listen, if you have a habit of complimenting people by saying 'it's just like blah blah blah,' I think you'd better quit it. It's really an insult of the highest order. If you absolutely have to box everything into a style, though, I guess there's no hope." She turned back toward me. "I suppose I can understand why you say it was

like a photograph, though. After all, photographs originally spawned from drawings."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah. You didn't know?" She raised an eyebrow at me.

It seemed saying, "You didn't know?" was her habit.

"The person who invented daguerreotype photography was a 'factual artist.' Apparently the study of perspective is related to the invention of the camera. You've heard of the camera obscura, right?"

Heard of it, yes. The so-called dark chamber. The phenomenon where if you make a hole in one spot on the wall of a pitch-black room, the outside scenery will project onto the opposite wall. It was quite an old technology, dating back to the days of the Roman Empire, and even having been mentioned by Aristotle. Supposedly it was the origin of the camera.

"It was just one invention used to create accurate images. The main idea behind perspective is to 'show things the way they really look.' That's how the French artist Courbet put it. He also made such realist remarks as 'I've never seen an angel, so why would I paint one?' It goes against my philosophy, though. If you get a kid to draw something, it never has any perspective or depth, right? Everything's just displayed in the foreground. The size of objects is also chosen at whim, so for example a house and a person are the same size, or the most important thing is drawn the biggest. In other words, what they're putting on the canvas isn't what the objects look like, it's how the objects feel. If you believe that drawing pictures is a form of personal expression, then I think that's the correct way to do it. If you think about it like that, a drawing that looks just like a photograph isn't a good drawing at all, is it?"

"Wow"

As soon as she had broken out the professional lingo, I lost my grip on what she was talking about. And with all her chitchat she hadn't even started setting up to paint. When was she planning to get started already?

"Though truth be told, photographs aren't such an accurate representation of reality either. If you edit a photograph well, it's not hard to fool people. Maybe they're not so different from paintings, in the sense that they're both selective."

"Uh, Kanami-san, were you going to draw me?"

"Right now I'm memorizing."

Just as I thought I was about to be called incompetent again, she spoke to me with unexpected gentleness.

"Maybe you didn't know? I'm the type who has to do her work alone. When I'm with other people my focus goes wacko."

She sounded like Leonardo da Vinci. Artists who don't look and paint at the same time weren't the kind of thing you heard about every day, but they weren't the most uncommon thing in the world either, so I wasn't particularly surprised.

"So when I do portraits, I just have to rely on my memory."

"You can do that?"

"To me, memory and perception are synonymous."

Now she sounded like Hannibal the Cannibal.

"Let's just stay and talk like this for the next two hours. Then I'll start painting after you leave. Ah, after I redo this cherry blossom picture, that is. I want to turn it into something at least you can comprehend. For your painting, I'll need to put down two layers of color, so it'll take a little while to draw. I should be able to give it to you tomorrow morning."

"You'll give it to me?"

"Sure. I don't need that kind of painting. I have no interest in paintings that are finished. I'll sign it, so if you sell it you should be able to make something decent. Of course you could always destroy it if you don't like it, but that seems like a bit of a waste. It should be worth about fifty million."

What a materialistic conversation.

Sigh.

"Hey, by the way, I hear you're on bad terms with Akane-san, is that right?"

"That's right. Or really, it's sort of a one-sided hatred on her part. As an individual, as a scholar, as a researcher, as a member of the ER3 Seven Fools, I personally have nothing but goodwill and respect for Sonoyama Akane, but…"

"But? What's that supposed to mean?"

She gave a little smirk. "As for 'just plain' Sonoyama Akane, I despise her."

• • •

Two hours later.

After leaving Kanami-san's atelier, I headed for Kunagisa's room. She was in bed, but evidently she had awoken at some point and fixed my watch. In a world-class prank, she had changed the digital face so that the numbers were displayed backward, but at least it seemed to be working, so I stuck it on my left arm, patted the sleeping Kunagisa on the head, said thanks, and headed to Akane-san's room.

"Play me," she challenged, and then said with a delighted smile, "I'll give myself a bigger handicap."

With that, she lined her side of the shogi board with chess pieces.

"It's a Japanese-Western compromise."

"Kinda like two different martial arts styles, huh?"

Handicap notwithstanding, I was thoroughly trounced. Seven times in a row.

Himena Maki,
genius fortune-teller.

2

ASSEMBLY AND ARITHMETIC

If you blind yourself to the fact that your opinion is entirely wrong, you're essentially right.

1

I bludgeoned the slumbering Kunagisa awake, forced her to wash her face, and tied her hair up in pigtails for her. Then with her still half-asleep, and me half carrying her, we headed to the dining hall, where everyone else from the mansion was already gathered.

Round table, two empty seats.

I helped Kunagisa to her seat and then sat down next to her. As I settled in my chair, I took a quick look around the table at each person.

Out of the twelve people present, the most eye-catching person—and I'm not sure whether or not this goes without saying—was none other than the mistress of the house, Akagami Iria-san. The concept of beauty is wholly subjective, varying from one person to the next, so to say Iria-san was beautiful would probably be pointless. If I say she was beautiful, that was simply something I personally felt and nothing more. Besides, Akari-san the maid was way more up my alley, as long as we're talking about personal preferences. Uh, but none of that matters.

Seriously.

To give something more objective, Akagami Iria was a classy woman. She wore her pretty black hair in a roll, coupled with an expensive-looking dress. She was actually somewhat mismatched, but her excessive classiness more than made up for it. She seemed to be around the same age as me, still in her twenties, but man, upbringing and lineage really do have their effects on people. Of course, there's always other factors as well, but those things are important for sure. That's always been the case.

Akagami Iria.

The black sheep granddaughter of the Akagami Foundation.

"Well then, now that Kunagisa-san is here, shall we commence with the best part of the day?" She put her hands together like a little kid. "Chow down." It seemed she was fairly immature emotionally. It was probably safe to say she wasn't the most worldly person out there, but it was probably just as well to her.

Incidentally, this island, where people were largely free to do as they wished, had a single rule: "We all eat dinner together." It was a simple rule that shouldn't have been hard for anyone to follow, but indeed, quite a few so-called geniuses had failed to do so and ended up leaving the island. There are a lot of similarities between a genius and a person with no common sense or decency.

Iria-san sat with two maids on either side of her. On her left were Teruko-san and Rei-san. On her right, Akari-san and Hikari-san. There was no way to distinguish between Akari-san and Hikari-san, so I couldn't tell which one was which. Theoretically one would've been able to tell them apart by

their facial expressions and gestures and such, but for the nonobservant type like myself, it was a challenge. Kunagisa seemed to be able to distinguish between the two (which was no mystery, since it was Kunagisa, after all), but depending on the conversation, she seemed to have trouble distinguishing who was Iria-san. Nobody seemed to mind.

"Now then, everybody raise your glasses… cheers!" she said almost as if singing, her glass raised high in the air. Everyone else, including myself, did likewise. But it bore mentioning that my glass and Kunagisa's glass were filled not with wine, but with juice.

After all, we were underage.

A number of dishes were set beautifully around the table. They were the proud masterpieces of chef extraordinaire Sashirono Yayoi. I'll start with the dish closest to me and go in that order:

Crowned lamb roast, cappuccino-based sweet potato soup, foie gras terrine with truffle gnocchi, steamed blue mussels, Belgian eel simmered in green sauce, pickled herring, whale meat sashimi, sauce-covered ravioli, ostrich meat carpaccio, fruit salad, potato salad with egg, and, finally, oil-sautéed mushrooms.

Yup, I was clueless.

Probably because Yayoi-san had created each dish specifically to cater to the respective tastes of each guest, even after hearing the names, I had no idea what I was eating. But that was neither here nor there. It's not like a name has that profound of an influence on the thing itself.

I think.

After all this, there was said to be dessert as well. If you thought about it, it was really a copious quantity of food. And

with Yayoi being the culinary maestro she was, the food was so delicious that I all but entirely neglected to watch my weight. Granted, Yayoi-san had apparently factored that into her cooking.

"After factoring in the nutritional value, it's still this amazing. She really is a genius," I muttered to myself more than a couple of times.

Speaking of which, I had spoken to Yayoi-san a bit during lunch. When I had gone to the dining hall, she happened to be the only other person around, so I used the opportunity to inquire about the popular rumors about her.

In other words, what was this secret power that allowed her to make any dish better than any other chef?

That was the question.

Upon hearing it, Yayoi-san gave a curious smirk.

"I'm afraid reality doesn't quite live up to the legends. Unlike Himena-san, I don't have any sort of wild superpowers. Basically, it's just effort and discipline."

"Really?"

"Well, I suppose I can imagine what might have started such a rumor. My senses of taste and smell are a little, well, a *lot* stronger than the average person's."

She flicked out her tongue. "To give an anecdotal example, ah, okay, like Helen Keller. She was blind, but they say she could distinguish between people just by their smell. I'm a little bit like that. My sense of smell isn't quite that amazing, but, for example…"

She took my arm and, without warning, licked the palm of my hand. I never would have dreamed things would have ended up like this, and I nearly let out a yelp, though somehow I managed to suppress it.

With her tongue still out, she gave an Einsteinish grin. "You've got type AB blood, don't you?" she said. "Negative, right?"

Being so told, it occurred to me that she was right. A public health doctor once told me, "You have an extremely rare blood type." So Yayoi-san was right for sure, but…

"You can really tell all that just by licking my skin?"

"Well, by licking your sweat, to be specific. My tongue can distinguish between approximately twenty thousand flavors, dividing them into twenty levels of intensity. My sense of smell is probably around half that good, I suppose." She tilted her head thoughtfully. It was a cute mannerism. "I'm not smart like Sonoyama-san; I'm terrible at art, unlike Ibuki-san; I'm not particularly skilled with machines like Kunagisa-san; I certainly don't have special powers like Himena-san; and there's not much else I'm any good at, but I've had just this one strong gift since I was a kid. I figured becoming a chef was the only way to take advantage of it."

Perfect taste, they call it.

It's like the taste version of perfect pitch, except perfect taste isn't something you can acquire with training. In other words, Sashirono Yayoi-san was, to just come out and say it, one of the lucky few chosen by God. Among the highly skilled, there are two types of people: those who are chosen, and those who choose themselves—those who were born with it, and those who work for it. Of course, Yayoi-san had "discipline and effort," but she was evidently the former type.

So the path of a chef was not really something she had chosen. She had been born with this gift, and for that reason had gone on to study gastronomy, travel to the West, and polish her inborn talents even further.

The idea of flavor ultimately stems from each individual's ability to judge taste. How well a person can utilize and take advantage of flavor as if it was their own possession—that was largely connected to one's skill as a cook, and well reflected in Yayoi-san's own cooking.

Well, that's the chopped logic of it, but it doesn't mean much practically. To put it a better way, Yayoi-san's cooking was damn good.

If you thought of the round table as a clock with Iria-san sitting at twelve o'clock, then Sashirono Yayoi-san was at three o'clock next to Teruko-san and Rei-san.

At four o'clock was Sakaki Shinya-san. As you would expect from the man who had long been employed as Kanami-san's caretaker, he looked not the least bit intimidated, and was actually rather stately-looking.

Then next to him sat Ibuki Kanami-san at the five o'clock position. Behind her was her wheelchair, which she had likely used to come to the dining room. She didn't seem to be in a particularly bad mood, but she didn't look very cheerful either.

At six o'clock was Kunagisa. This meant she was sitting directly across from the mistress of the house, Akagami Iria-san. That was more than enough to make me nervous, but really that didn't matter; to Kunagisa, the word *nervous* didn't even exist in the Japanese language.

Then in lucky seat number seven sat myself.

Next to me at eight o'clock sat Sonoyama Akane-san of the Seven Fools. She was completely immersed in the devouring of Yayoi-san's cuisine. She had much more of an appetite than you might expect. Of course, she was a human being before she was a scholar—whether or not she would admit it

herself—and you can't live if you don't eat, but even if you disregarded that, she was a serious eater. Even I felt satisfied just watching her eat. It seemed to me that Yayoi-san must've been really proud to see her devouring her food so delightedly.

Next to Akane-san at nine o'clock sat the fortune-telling master, the one with ESP superpowers, Himena Maki-san. At some point she had apparently changed clothes, and was now adorned in an entirely different fashion than this morning. She wore a halter-neck striped shirt with a pale, pink cardigan and sheep-printed cropped pants. Her hair was up in twin ponytails. Possibly because she noticed me looking at her, she looked back at me with a strangely unpleasant sneer and sank her teeth into some roast lamb. It was an expression that said, "I know everything, but I'm not saying anything," and it made me wholly uncomfortable.

It never ends.

At ten and eleven o'clock sat Akari-san and Hikari-san. Teruko-san was completely silent and mostly expressionless. She just placed food in her mouth like it was a mechanical process. For someone to be able to eat this food without any sort of reaction, it made you wonder if she had any sense of taste. In the face of the three sisters' air of youthfulness, Rei-san, in contrast, had the look of a mature, uptight career woman. I hadn't heard her talk much, but judging from her appearance, she seemed to be the strict type, and I had heard the corroborating sob stories of Hikari-san several times by now.

So there you have it.

That's all twelve people.

Lucky number?

With a face like this?

Just babbling again. What kind of meaning lay in things like that? I was very obviously standing out here. You could even call me the black sheep. Then again, there had never been a place where I didn't stand out. Not Kobe, not Houston, not Kyoto, and not even on this island.

In this wide world, there's only one me.

Eh, whatever.

I like loneliness.

No bluff.

Even if I was bluffing.

"Oh by the way, if I can change the subject…" Iria-san said, bringing the individual conversations that had been developing up to now to an immediate halt. The power to direct the table conversation lay in Iria-san's hands alone. It was the selfish privilege befitting an upper-class girl.

She continued, raising her voice.

"It seems there are already rumors floating around, so I'll go ahead and make the announcement. This is about the next guest. The latest genius to grace this house."

All eyes were on Iria-san. Well, all except for Kunagisa, who continued to chow down on whale meat. To deliberately try and capture that girl's attention was quite a difficult task.

"I'd like to emphasize that our new guest is the possessor of such extraordinary, glorious talent that it even bears comparison to you all. I'd like very much to welcome this person, so please cooperate, okay?"

Each person gave a personalized reaction. The part about bearing comparison to everyone seemed to really shake things up. With everyone seemingly restraining themselves, only the very ordinary Shinya-san dared speak up.

"Question. Just who is this person? I don't really know a whole lot just from the rumors I've heard, but they say it's a real jack-of-all-trades. Is that right?"

"You could say that. We've only met once before, but, yeah, once was enough. This person is my hero." She gazed up, evidently deep in thought. "A truly heroic existence, to me. Like a detective in a mystery novel or a monster in a monster movie."

A monster?

I could feel my eyebrows raise of their own accord. Iria-san had just dropped a reference to monster movies, but was that really an accurate description of this person? That wasn't the kind of vocabulary you typically used to describe a person, and even if you did, it definitely wasn't a compliment.

"That's quite the hard sell. Sounds like we can expect quite a bit from this individual," Shinya-san said with a boisterous chuckle. "I hear this person can do all sorts of things… such as paint wonderfully and so on?"

"I've never seen it, but I wouldn't be surprised. I imagine something as simple as painting a picture shouldn't be a challenge."

As you'd expect, this seemed to have wounded Kanami-san's pride. She looked a little bit—by which I mean ridiculously—miffed.

"Might we possibly be graced with knowing the name of this superior specimen, Iria-san?" Kanami-san said. Her tone had a bite to it.

I had thought of this that morning as well, but Kanami-san really did have a lot of pride. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's not strictly a good thing either. Far be it for me

to cast aspersions about the way Kanami-san chose to live, but to say the least, I knew I could never live like that.

Iria's expression suggested that she didn't understand why Kanami-san was so mad (and in reality that probably was the case), and she answered plainly, "Aikawa-san."

Pure dumbfoundedness.

At this point, Kanami-san seemed like the stupid one.

"Owing to an extremely busy schedule, Aikawa-san will only be staying here for three days, but everyone, please be friendly. Aikawa-san is a big deal to me. You could even call it love."

Iria-san's cheeks turned bright red. Seeing that childish mannerism, her audience was thrown even further into bewilderment. It felt like she could've made any demand, however bossy, and everyone would've forgiven it. She innately had that sort of air about her.

Probably her lineage to blame again.

"Even still, Aikawa…"

I'd never heard the name, ignorant as I was. I looked over at Kunagisa to see her reaction, but she was still eating. When that girl was focused on something, she was always like that. More incorrigible than a child and harder to handle than an animal. Well, then again, at least she knew how to sit in a chair.

"Oh, I'm so looking forward to it. To think Aikawa-san is coming again. I've asked so many times. It's like a dream. Oh, what if it really was a dream?" she said as if in a daze. Judging from her current state, Iria-san must have been pretty head-over-heels for this Aikawa guy. It was like she was talking about the man she had been in love with for years and years.

She spoke his name with great reverence.

"Ah, speaking of which, Kunagisa-san," she said, turning the conversation toward Kunagisa. "You were going to leave before then, isn't that right?"

"Hmm? Oh, yup yup," she responded. She never stopped moving the chopsticks she held in her hands. The fact that she was holding a chopstick in each hand was enough of a testament to her bad table manners. "Yup, four more days."

"That's really too bad. It's going to be such a great opportunity. I'd really like you to meet Aikawa-san. There's really no way?"

"Afraid not. I'm from a world where once you've planned something you can't change it. They even call me the Living Time Table. Ii-chan, too, of course."

Don't drag me into this, I thought. Coming to this island in the first place was never part of my "time table."

Iria nodded with a truly disappointed look on her face. "Is that so? Say, could it be that you're not having a good time here? It doesn't seem like you've left your room much."

"I'm from a world where people don't leave their rooms much. But no, I'm having fun. Lots of fun. I can have fun anywhere, anytime, all the way."

Her words made me stiffen a bit. There was no exaggeration in what she said. For someone who's so completely immersed in their own world, there's never a time that isn't fun. And what of all other emotions? How tragic must it be to always be having fun, no matter where you are?

That was something I already knew the answer to.

"Ah, is that so?" Iria shrugged. "But Kunagisa-san, surely even you would find some value in meeting Aikawa-san. Meeting a person like that, you're bound to find some inspiration."

As if she had been waiting for the perfect timing, Kanami-san broke into the conversation. "Being influenced by another person is proof of one's mediocrity. Of one's impotence. How ridiculous. I don't know what kind of person this Aikawa is, but I sincerely doubt there's any need to meet him."

"Now now, is that a fact?" Playing devil's advocate with Kanami-san was the obvious choice, Sonoyama Akane. "I spent several years surrounded by the finest minds in the world, and I know for a fact that if I hadn't had that experience, I wouldn't be where I am today. You can better yourself just by spending time with brilliant people."

"The ER3? What a joke. You must be stupid. Why would anyone ever want to bind themselves to such an organization?" Kanami sneered.

"I don't consider that I'm *binding* myself. Everyone is free to move about as they please and help hone one another's skills."

" 'Free?' Don't just throw that word around. An organization with no restrictions isn't an organization at all. In the end, even you were just a member of the hierarchy, isn't that right? What a crock. I've been here on this island with you for a while now, but I certainly don't feel as if I've become any more refined. If anything, my worth is decreasing."

They glared at each other. To act this way in front of a whole group of people, they really were childish. I was a little bit appalled.

The maids tried their best to mediate, but Iria-san had a look of pure delight on her face as she watched the dueling pair, so they retrained from stepping in. This kind of situation wasn't really my cup of tea. Meanwhile, Yayoi-san looked

fairly indifferent as well, while Maki-san looked entirely unimpressed, and Shinya-san seemed to have written the whole dispute off as an everyday occurrence. It was amazing that not a single person there could stop them.

Ah, wait, there was someone.

Just one person.

"After all, Ibuki-san, humans are a colonial species. People such as yourself who act like bums and expect special treatment all ought to rethink their lifestyle, if you ask me," I said.

"I suppose that means you can't function without being surrounded by other people. People aren't migratory fish, you know. And I don't expect special treatment. I just don't put myself down. I live honestly, and assess things as they really are," Kanami snapped.

"Hmm, I wonder."

" 'Hmm, I wonder'? Ah, more vague questions. You think you look clever by taking an ambiguous stance without ever clearly stating your opinion. Yeah, real clever. 'I wonder,' " Kanami said.

"This is a little hard to listen to."

A voice.

It was Kunagisa.

She pouted her lips out like a sulky kid and looked at Kanami-san.

"This is hurting my ears, Kanami-chan, Akane-chan."

In an instant, she had drawn everyone's attention. Nobody had expected Kunagisa, of all people, to say that.

I had had quite a few experiences with Kunagisa in the past, so it wasn't beyond imaginable. Kunagisa Tomo hated watching people fight quite a bit. Considering her usual

happy-go-lucky attitude, it might have been a little unexpected, but it did make some sense. She was a fun-loving girl, which meant she didn't like situations that weren't fun. The logic was as simple as that.

"I'm sorry. I went too far." Somewhat surprisingly, it was Kanami-san who apologized first. In turn, Akane-san couldn't help but acknowledge that Kanami-san, too, was a prominent woman of respectable status.

"I was wrong, too," she said, awkwardly avoiding eye contact.

They both hung their heads and stared at the floor. Though the atmosphere was still distinctly awkward, at least the fiasco seemed to be over.

Until Maki-san ruined it completely.

"This is gonna get worse before it gets better," she muttered with an icy voice and audacious grin. Just what was this fortune-teller chick trying to butt in with, now that things had finally settled down? Meanwhile, Iria-san's eyes were twinkling with excitement.

"Is that a prophecy?" she asked. "What do you mean it's going to get worse before it gets better? This is so fascinating. Will you tell us?"

"I won't. I'm not saying anything. Nope." As she spoke, she cast a sideways glance in Kunagisa's direction. "I'm not quite so arrogant as to get the rest of the world involved."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I protested without thinking. As for Kunagisa, she had already turned her full attention back to nutritional intake. It was as though this really was nothing more than a simple annoyance to her. "Maki-san, what do you mean by that?"

"There's no meaning. Just like there's no meaning in your actions. You know, you're, wow, so you're the kind of guy who'll get angry for the sake of a complete stranger, huh? That's not a very good thing. It's not *bad*, per se, but it's not good."

"Oh my, and why is that?" Iria-san said, stepping into our conversation. Or rather, maybe I was the one on the sideline. "I think it's wonderful to be able to get angry on behalf of a stranger. That's not so common in the world nowadays."

"That's because people who can expose their emotions for the sake of someone else are the same people who blame things on others when something goes wrong. I despise people like you."

It had to be the first time in quite a while that someone had spoken that harshly right to my face. Slowly, she brought her glaring gaze to meet my eyes.

"You just let yourself get carried along by other people. You're the type of person who ignores traffic lights just because everyone else is doing it. You're an abominable excuse for a human being. They often say 'harmonize without agreeing,' but in your case, young man, it's like you're agreeing without harmonizing. I won't say that's bad. I won't say anything as to that. One's identity and one's worth are not always connected. A train that runs along a track is better than a train that doesn't. So I won't say anything as to that. But I hate people like you. I *despise* them. People like you always blame things on others, never acknowledging their own responsibility."

Just carried along with the flow.

To be sure, that is how I lived.

However…

"I don't recall…"

I hated it.

Meeting Kunagisa, I had grown thoroughly repulsed by it.

"I don't recall you telling me that, Himena Maki-san."

"Oh, are you angry? Gee, your boiling point's a lot lower than I expected. Are you the type who has mood swings all the time?"

"Ii…"

Eat me.

Go screw yourself.

Go screw yourself go screw yourself go screw yourself…

Go screw yourself, *bitch*…

"Ii-chan."

Tug.

Kunagisa yanked on my sleeve.

"This isn't worth getting angry about."

Kunagisa Tomo.

"Okay."

I felt a chill go through my body. The power drained from my body. It was beyond weakness, closer to exhaustion. I slumped in my chair.

"Sorry. I was just joking, 'kay?" Maki-san said to Kunagisa with a terribly sweet smile.

• • •

And so dinner that day was a bit of a disaster. Of course, the two days prior hadn't exactly gone off without a hitch either, but the intelligence of this jack-of-all-trades seemed to have shattered something. This Aikawa-san's coming visit to the island was becoming something to dread. Granted, I wouldn't

be there when it happened, so I didn't really have much to do with it.

Nevertheless, I had no idea why Maki-san was digging into me so much. Certainly I hadn't made a great first impression on her, but that couldn't have been the only reason at this point. It was obvious that she hated me, but that wasn't reason enough to be harping on me so aggressively like this.

The opposite of affection is not animosity, but apathy. If she just didn't like me, she wouldn't go so far out of her way to pick on me like this. Why, out of this entire group of brilliant people, would Himena Maki specifically target a boring, ordinary person like me? We didn't have anything to do with each other.

It was strange.

Brooding over the subject in my mind, I didn't think for a moment about Maki-san's prophecy of the "worsening of things." If I had given it some thought, it's not likely that anything would've gone differently anyway, but looking back, I can't help but regret that a little.

I guess there was nothing I could have done about that, though.

After all, only Maki-san could have regretted things before they happened.

2

It was already past ten o'clock when I borrowed Kunagisa's bath to freshen up. Kunagisa sat in front of her PCs in the revolving chair, but all three terminals were turned off. She just wanted to spin. Must've had a strong stomach.

"You take a bath, too."

"No."

"I don't care about tonight, but take one tomorrow."

"No."

"Tomorrow I'll strip you down, tie your hands and feet, and throw you in. If you don't want that, you'd better do it yourself."

"Awww, what a drag." She half rose out of her chair to stretch. "I envy fish. They don't ever have to take baths. Hmm, but I wonder if they get cold in the winter. Oh oh oh, by the way, have you heard this before, Ii-chan? So, like, let's say you're keeping a fish in a fish tank. And say you gradually raise the temperature of the tank. Like you raise it so gradually that the fish doesn't even notice. Eventually the water gets so hot that it's boiling, but the fish's body has gotten used to the gradual change, so it can go on swimming without even noticing how hot the water is. It sounds like a lie, but it's for real. Now, Ii-chan, what lesson can we gather from this?"

"That global warming isn't a problem."

"Ding ding ding!" She looked utterly amused. What a peppy chick, I thought, then without warning, she completely collapsed. Face-first, belly-down, without breaking her fall.

I flinched.

"Owww. That hurt."

No doubt.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm hungry…"

"You just ate a freaking feast."

"That doesn't matter. I missed breakfast and lunch, so I probably haven't eaten enough. I slept all afternoon, so I don't

have to sleep again until tomorrow, but I guess you really have to make sure you sleep and eat properly."

"Human bodies aren't made for that kind of treatment."

"I guess I'm not human then. Let's get something to eat, Ii-chan. Will you tie my hair up first?"

"I think Yayoi-san's probably already back in her room. She gets up early, so don't you think she's already sleeping?"

We couldn't just go wake her up so she would make some dinner. We had to remember that she was a guest, too.

"Hikari-chan is probably awake though. Hikari-chan's cooking is delicious, too, in a Hikari-chan kinda way. If Hikari-chan's asleep, too, Ii-chan, you can make me something."

"Why me?"

"Well, 'cuz you look so a-meow-zing from behind when you're cooking."

"Ehehehe," she laughed naughtily, still facedown.

"Okay okay okay. Fine fine. Understood, Miss Tomo. First I'll tie that hair up, so get over here."

"Oh me oh my."

I tied her hair in a loose ponytail. Then we left her room, heading for the living room.

"Ah, by the way, sorry about earlier."

"About what? Ah, about the thing with Maki-chan. Yeah, it's okay. I'll forgive you. But really, compared to the old days, you've gotten soft. I didn't think you'd let her off with just a single comment like that. I wonder if living in Houston repressed you or something."

"Yeah, well, living in a desert like that for five years, your beliefs start to change. I'm not sure if it matters that it was a desert, though."

"You should tell me about it sometime. What happened over there and stuff."

"You've changed a lot, too. Not so much on the outside, but on the inside."

"There's nothing in this world that doesn't change. It's *panta rhei*."

"Handa Rei?"

"The cycling of all things… Ii-chan, you're supposed to be smart, so why don't you know anything?"

"I just have a bad memory. All I want is an average one, really." Just enough of one so that I wouldn't forget the fun times.

Just enough of one so that I could realize the world is full of good things, too.

"Ah, Akari-chan spotted," Kunagisa said, and charged down the hallway. I looked to see that, indeed, Akari-san was there. Or really, at this distance there was no way I could tell whether it was Akari-san or Hikari-san. It was also possible that it was Teruko-san with her glasses removed. But if Kunagisa said it was Akari-san, it was most likely her.

By the time I reached them, Kunagisa and Akari-san had already exchanged a few words. Kunagisa returned to my side and Akari-san continued down the hall in the opposite direction. I wondered about her. She must have had work left to do, even at this hour. If that was the case, she really was going above and beyond.

"What did you talk about?"

"She says Hikari-chan's in the living room."

"Oh yeah? That's convenient."

Of course, not everything in the world goes so smoothly.

When we arrived in the living room, not only Hikari-san, but also Shinya-san and my arch-nemesis Himena Maki-san were there. The three of them sat on a horseshoe-shaped sofa, engaged in lighthearted discussion. On the table were some glasses and alcohol, plus some cheese on a big plate prepared as a snack. Hikari-san promptly noticed our presence and called out with a raised hand, "Ah, Tomo-san!" Having been spotted, there was nothing we could do. We walked over and joined them on the sofa.

Awkwardly, Kunagisa quickly snapped up the seat next to Hikari-san, forcing me to sit next to Maki-san. All the same, I couldn't bear the thought of turning tail and running now. It was dishonorable to flee in the face of the enemy. But Maki-san, seeming to see right through me, greeted me with a wicked expression. "Welcome to my club," she said boastfully.

"Sorry about before. I guess I hit a touchy subject," she apologized insincerely. "Really, I'm sorry. Anybody would get mad about such a sensitive subject."

"It wasn't a particularly sensitive subject."

"Oh, it was. It was so pitiful." She sneered at me. Might she have been drunk? No, she was like this all the time. In fact, she was probably more pleasant when drunk. She slugged down her wine in one gulp, then thrust her glass at me.

"Now you drink, too, boy. Alcohol is good, you know. You forget all the bad things."

"There's nothing so bad I want to forget."

"And there's nothing so good you want to remember," she giggled. "I don't think your poor memory is to blame for not having any happy memories. There are few happy things in your life, and few sad things. There's not much of anything at

all. It's all empty. It's an emptiness scarier than darkness. Ahahaha. Isn't life fun?"

Retrocognition, telepathy.

It seemed the advertisements about her weren't just baloney. She was a damn clairvoyant.

"Give me a break, Maki-san. This is just bullying."

"Yup. I'm bullying you. Now drink up."

"I don't do alcohol. I'm underage."

"How by-the-book of you. Oh dear, you're being so cold. Oh, Ii-chan, you're so cool! Is that what you want to hear? That's weird. I should call you the Boy Who's Cold Even in the Summer."

She put her glass back in front of her with a bored expression on her face.

Apparently quite starving, Kunagisa scarfed down the cheese appetizer. She ate with two hands, displaying terrible manners. Of course, knowing that it would cause no harm in this situation, it was hard to care about stuff like that.

"It's supreme, Valencay, and Maroille cheese," Hikari-san explained sweetly. Apparently they were all good cheeses to have with wine. Trying a single piece, I found that it was indeed delicious, but probably only Kunagisa would be able to stand a whole lot of it without even so much as some water.

"How did it go with Kanami?" Shinya-san asked me after a while, cheese in hand. He seemed fairly interested. "Did the modeling go well?"

"Eh, I suppose. There were no problems, anyway."

"She's got a pretty foul personality, eh?" He spoke without euphemism, about his own boss, no less.

"Oh no, she doesn't—"

"Is that so? Well, at least I've never met a woman with a *worse* personality than that."

I had.

She was sitting right next to me, drinking up.

"No, she was fine, really… Oh, but she did smash one of her pictures all of a sudden, and that was surprising."

He smirked.

"Oh, that… yeah, yeah. When I got back to the atelier, she was all, 'Shinya-san, dispose of this garbage.' I was like, 'Who are you, Picasso?' Sorry about that. That's just her thing. Don't pay any attention to it. That woman's seen quite a bit of success without exerting much effort, so she's very obstinate. She can't live without acting like a big shot."

"Her 'thing'?"

"Yeah, you know. If she acts like that, she looks like a world-class artist, don't you think? Didn't she say all sorts of artisty things to you? Sort of snooty things? That's how she is, you see."

"Well, but, that's her true nature, right? I mean… I thought it was."

"Oh, of course. It's unquestionably her true nature. But she doesn't have to *say* that kind of stuff, now, does she? If she were a real artist, she wouldn't talk like that. Kanami is a genius, to be sure, but she's miles away from being an artist. She's just giving herself an image. At least, that's what I think. I'd appreciate it if she would peel away the façade, but you know how it is." He looked a little sad. "Seriously," he continued, taking a sip of wine. As he wandered slightly off topic, the glass of wine suited him quite well. It was a little enviable.

"That's the reason I asked you to be her model, too. She doesn't do many portraits, you see."

"Oh yeah? But she was saying she doesn't choose her subjects."

"Well, she doesn't, but… It's a taste issue. She hates people. No matter how she draws them, they complain, you see. Plus, you know, because she used to be blind, and now her legs are bad, and above all else she has that kind of personality, she doesn't get along well with anyone."

"That's how geniuses are."

The only genius I'd ever heard of who was at all good with human relationships was Gauss.

People like Michelangelo were all supposedly widely disliked. But with Michelangelo, it was because he didn't like anybody to begin with.

"You don't have to be a genius to be socially awkward," Maki-san interjected with a phony innocent expression.

Ah, indeed.

"That woman has a lot of pride about having reached where she is on her own. So it's no wonder she doesn't get along with Sonoyama-san."

Indeed, Akane-san, who had honed her talents in a group atmosphere at the ER3 system, and Kanami-san, who was a raging individualist, were practically polar opposites. It was only natural that they never hit it off.

"It was I who taught art to Kanami-san," Shinya-san said. "Her eyes got better, and… you have to understand, back then she had nothing. No family, no special knowledge to speak of. So I gave her a brush. I was only trying to comfort her, but just a month later, she had surpassed me."

"So you're an artist, too?"

I hadn't heard that.

He shrugged his right shoulder, a little embarrassed.

"After Kanami-san surpassed me, I quit. When Verrocchio realized da Vinci had surpassed him, he broke his own paintbrush. I, too, grew to understand his feelings in that moment. With this person of unbelievable talent right next to me all the time, there's no need for me to paint pictures."

That morning, Shinya-san had told me we were alike. I didn't know what he meant until now.

The Sakaki Shinya relative to Ibuki Kanami. It was just like me relative to Kunagisa Tomo. Though he spoke badly of her, it was clear to me now that Shinya-san had unconditional affection for Kanami-san.

"So you're the kind of guy who does everything for other people, too, eh, Shinya-san?" Maki-san said, as if reading my mind (what an analogy). "Of course in Shinya-san's case, there's a charm to it, unlike with *some* people."

"And why's that?"

"He doesn't go around blaming others."

She was going to bring me down blow by blow.

"Um, hey hey…" Hikari-san interjected with a worried look. "Who wants something to drink?"

"Some kind of soda would be good."

"Certainly, right away."

She pulled a small bottle of ginger ale out of the living room fridge and quickly returned. With a bright smile, she placed it beside me.

"Please enjoy."

She really was quite the hard worker. I thought it would be rude to keep fighting like this in front of her, so I forced my wound-up nerves to relax.

Gah, there I go blaming things on others.

Damn…

Maki-san had me in the palm of her hand.

"Hikari-chan, gimme a drink, too," Kunagisa said.

"Certainly!" She went over to Kunagisa with the ginger ale.

"Come to think of it, you're underage as well, isn't that right, Kunagisa-chan?" Maki-san said. "But it's okay, isn't it? How about it? Just one drink."

"Please don't encourage her."

"My my, playing guardian, are we?" Maki-san sneered. "Ah, how wonderful it must be to be young."

"But you're still young as well."

"No, I'm already twenty-nine." She spoke as if it were no big deal, but I was a little surprised. She was always dressed like such a kid, I figured she had to be about the same age as Iria-san.

"Wow. So that means you're the same age as Kanami," Shinya-san said. "Then Himena-san, you *are* still young. You know, I'm already thirty-two years old. Once you pass thirty, you really start to feel your age. You get winded easily and such."

"Hikari-san, how old are you?" I took the chance to ask.

"I'm twenty-seven."

"So then, Akari-san is twenty-seven, too?"

"Yup. We're triplets, after all."

Twenty-seven… I repeated the number a few times in my head. Twenty-seven years old. Akari-san and Hikari-san, both twenty-seven. Maybe this is rude of me, but they really didn't look like twenty-seven. I almost wondered if there was some sort of age-stopping mystery air flowing through the island.

Nah, not likely.

This wasn't Neverland.

"Akane-chan is thirty, right? And I think Yayoi-chan is about thirty as well. Boy, when you sit down and think about it, everyone sure is young. Iria-chan must really like young, female geniuses."

"Pretty lousy hobby, if you ask me."

Kunagisa nodded in agreement as she crammed her face with cheese. Apparently having picked up a spicy piece, she immediately went for the ginger ale and chugged it, but it looked as if it went down the wrong pipe, and she released a barrage of coughs. What the hell was she doing?

Shinya-san let out a sigh. "I thought if I brought Kanami here to cohabitate with other people, she might change a little. Kind of like when you send a truant kid off to camp. But this strategy seems to have been off the mark. It was kind of like a last resort. At this point, she'll probably be living like that for the rest of her life."

Misunderstood by everyone.

Not expecting anyone to understand.

Not relying on anyone but herself.

Eating away at herself all the while.

"Well, that's one way to live."

"Look who's talking."

I don't think I even have to mention whose line that was.

"Uh, speaking of which, Maki-san, why are you here on the island?" Shinya-san said. "I've been wondering for a while. It's not just a vacation, is it?"

"It is. This place is a sweet deal. You get to live for free, and you even get money for it. It's Xanadu. If I use the Net, I can even still do fortune-telling. It's a world of convenience. Nonstop good times."

What a crappy excuse for an adult.

And pretty *damn* crappy, at that.

"I don't recall hearing *your* story," Maki-san said, breaking my silence. "Why are *you* on this island then? And please don't tell me something like you came here just because Kunagisa-chan said she was going."

Don't act like you don't know, bitch.

Seriously, why was she picking on me like that? Maybe she was really just making fun of me with no objective or reason whatsoever.

It wasn't unthinkable.

"Wrong," she said, then looked over at Kunagisa.

"Fine, assuming guys like you don't matter anyway, why is Kunagisa-chan here?"

"Just a whim, just a whim. I don't go making reasons for every little thing I do."

"I wonder." Maki-san gave a suspicious grin. I didn't know what the deal with her personality was, but she seemed to be getting along with everyone besides me rather well, including Kunagisa.

"She's clever, unlike you."

"Ah, getting sick of this? Getting tense? Hehehe, but I won't stop. I'm gonna keep playing with you until I'm bored of it."

She wore an absolutely sadistic smile.

I felt like captured game.

"Telepathy, eh? Amazing as usual, Himena-san, but lay off him," Shinya-san cut in. "You've chased a whole lot of brilliant people off this island doing that. He'll be leaving soon enough as it is, so there's no need to send him home any faster, right?"

"Everyone I try to have fun with hates me. It's discrimination against people with superpowers, I tell you."

Superpowers…

They talked about it like it was an everyday thing, but did such a thing really exist? Indeed, at the ER3 system, as a "comprehensive" research center, they had even conducted advanced psychological research relating to super abilities. Psychokinesis, ESP, DOP, levitation, and teleportation. I had seen any number of papers on the inexplicable, unobservable subject in my time in the ER3 program, and even met a person who claimed it was for real (though he was a phony).

But all I had concluded was that no matter how you thought about it, that stuff was a bunch of bull. None of those papers really explained anything, despite how hard they tried to arbitrarily cram facts into conclusions.

It was what they called "dry love." The dry love-filled thesis papers of these phony scientists were, to be fair, amusing in their own right, but that's all they were. They certainly didn't have what it took to convince someone of anything.

"That's just because you have a narrow mind."

"Have you ever heard of the word *privacy*?"

"It's not my fault. I see what I see and I hear what I hear. And by the way, trying to run away is futile. No matter where you go, I'll know exactly where you are."

"So, you have remote viewing and supersensitive hearing powers, too!" Kunagisa said. "I know a lot of people with special powers, but this is the first time I've ever met someone with so many. Multimulti. Amazing."

Despite knowing that our pasts, futures, and minds were all possibly being read right now, Kunagisa was without a care in the world. Or maybe she didn't have any secrets to keep.

"I really wanted psychokinesis, actually, but I ended up gravitating toward ESP for some reason. Too bad… I mean, doesn't teleportation seem so convenient?"

Psychokinesis—referred to as PK—and ESP were academically defined as two completely different abilities. In mainstream metapsychology, it's often said that the existence of ESP can now be proven, though the same cannot be said about PK. This is because the idea of PK is something completely inhuman, while ESP is simply an extension of actual human senses.

"Fortune-telling is about all I can do with just ESP. It's not such a useful ability," Maki-san said with a sigh.

Certainly there wasn't much she could have done apart from fortune-telling, but I still felt skeptical about the whole idea.

"Maki-san, can you prove that you have these special powers?"

"I don't think I need to. How would you, for example, prove that you are you? Would you show us your driver's license? Would you be convinced if I had a Superpowers License? It doesn't matter anyway. Whether you think it's true or think it's a lie or think it's something else, that doesn't affect anything anyway. Just like my knowing everything doesn't change anything."

"Mmm, I wonder."

"You sure have a lot of doubt. Ah, okay, how about I give you your fortune again?" she said out of the blue, grinning at me.

Damn, I hadn't seen this coming.

"You deceived me the first time, after all. Yeah, let's do it. It's a good opportunity for you. I almost never do fortune-tellings for free."

"I'll pass."

"Quick answer. You really hate me, huh? Hehehe, my mentor always taught me to 'push people's hatred onward,' so that's what I do."

"I can't help but wonder if your mentor meant something else."

"You're quite a liar, aren't you?" She began her fortune-telling, regardless of what I had said.

"You don't like showing your emotions, but you don't like controlling them either, so you have many regrets. Even though you let yourself get pushed around by other people's opinions, you're quite independent. When faced with a challenge, you run away without deliberating, but you're not dumb. *And*, you don't like competition. Sound about right?

"Is that what you people call a 'cold reading'?" I shot back. "You could've just said anything. Those are all things that hold true for any person, to some extent."

"Is that so? Hmm, maybe. Then let's talk about your relationship with Kunagisa-chan. What we call a compatibility reading. Hmm, both you and Kunagisa-chan are the type who don't need friends. Yet for some reason you stick together. And the reason for that is? Oh my, this part is fairly skewed. You stay by her side because you're jealous of her. And while you're jealous of her ability to express herself freely, she somehow looks unhappy, regardless of whether or not she really is. You see this girl who has everything you want and can do all the things you can't do, yet she is still, for some

reason, unhappy, and that makes you feel better. That makes you feel like it doesn't matter if you can't get what you want."

"Really?" Kunagisa gave me a confused look. Whether it was true or not, it wasn't okay to say such a thing right in front of Kunagisa.

I shook my head. "No, Maki-san, I think you've got me all wrong. I'm not such a complicated guy. I'm simple as could be."

"Yeah, well, maybe, maybe not."

"Say, Maki-chan," Kunagisa said, moving closer to her. "If that's really the case, then why do I spend time with Ii-chan?"

"Sorry, but I can't seem to read your mind or past." Maki-san gave a shrug. "Occasionally I meet someone like that. I guess it's a compatibility issue or something, but the aura surrounding them is very ambiguous and hard to decipher. It's like they're in the dark, and it's a little unsettling. It puts me in a bad mood."

So maybe she was just venting on me.

How awful.

"Himena-san, in light of the occasion. I'll go ahead and ask a question, too. How does it feel to be able to see the future and read people's minds and such?" Shinya-san said. "I'm just curious."

"Hmm. That's like asking how things look to spiders with their eight eyes. To attempt a simple explanation, it's like watching TV. It's like the entire room is covered with TVs, and I don't have a remote. I can't turn them off, and I can't change the channels, so all I can do is watch. It's like having a few more brains than regular people, if you can imagine that."

I couldn't.

"Now, what's his face over there got us a little off-topic, Kunagisa-chan, but I still haven't heard why you came to this island."

"It was just on a whim. I tell you."

"No. I may not be able to read you, but I know that's not why."

Kunagisa wheezed out a strange sigh. She seemed a little troubled. I wasn't a big fan of Maki-san's way of posing the question, but to be honest, I had been wondering about it myself. For what reason had Kunagisa, the ultimate shut-in with no equal, been compelled to travel all the way out here to Wet Crow's Feather Island?

"Okay, I'll tell you," she finally said with a piece of cheese on her tongue. "I'm interested in an incident that took place here a long time ago."

3

But I didn't get the chance to learn any more. Just as I was about to ask, "What do you mean, 'incident'?" I bit down on my tongue, hard. Thus, I was unable to get the words out. But even if I miraculously had somehow, it never would've reached Kunagisa's ears, nor anyone else's ears, including my own.

It would have been drowned out by the other noise.

The shaking.

I soon realized it was an earthquake.

"Gah!" Shinya-san uttered.

"Everyone, please, stay calm!" urged Hikari-san, whose profession demanded that she remain cool no matter what happened.

Maki-san, who looked as if she had been expecting the earthquake all along, reclined on the couch without a glint of worry.

I tried to recall what I had learned about earthquakes back in my first year of junior high school, when I was still in Japan. Supposedly they would start with small tremors, and then get bigger and bigger. I couldn't quite recall which were S waves and which were P waves, or figure out which were horizontal and which were vertical tremors, but that didn't matter.

At any rate, the strength of the shaking had jumped a few levels. In a panic, I shoved Kunagisa—whose expression said "I have no idea what's going on"—onto the sofa and threw myself on top of her. There was a chandelier right above her. If that were to fall, she wouldn't stand a chance of survival with that tiny stature of hers. That was my thinking at the time, anyway.

But my efforts seemed to have been in vain, because not a moment later, the shaking died down. Of course, when I say "not a moment later," I mean in terms of real time. To me, it felt only slightly less dragging and terrible than five minutes with your hand on a stove.

In reality, the shaking had probably lasted for less than ten seconds.

"Is it over?" I asked, still on top of Kunagisa.

"Yeah." Maki-san answered. It was the word of a prophet, and probably trustworthy. Meanwhile, Kunagisa groaned with her face buried in the sofa, so I got off her for the time being.

"An earthquake… It was pretty big, too. I wonder what it rated on the scale," Shinya-san said, looking around the room. The glasses and bottles on the table had fallen, and Hikari-san had already reflexively begun to clean.

"Pardon me, Hikari-san. I'm going to borrow the phone. I'm worried about Kanami." He pointed to the house phone. Hikari-san nodded. He headed to the white phone by the cabinet.

"Hikari-san, do you have a radio or something?" I said. "I want to check the earthquake's level. Oh, Tomo, could you look it up on the Internet?"

"Well, there's probably already been a breaking news bulletin. We're technically in Kyoto right now, right? Oh, wait, is that wrong?"

"It was a level 3 or 4. I can't quite pinpoint the epicenter, but it's probably around Maizuru, where the level would be at 5," Maki-san said quite matter-of-factly. "And it seems like there weren't many injuries, even in urban areas."

"How do you know?" Perhaps it was inelegant of me to pose such a question, but it just felt like the natural thing to say.

She let out a big sigh before answering. "It's like I've been telling you, I just know. You may be smart, but you sure are slow. Don't have much of a memory either, it would seem. Hey wait, doesn't that make you stupid? Anyway, to use an expression, I can see these things clear as day. Ibuki-san and the others are all fine."

"Ah, remote viewing and superhearing, was it?"

Distance wasn't a factor for her. She could technically watch TV somewhere on the other side of the ocean, and even predict what would appear next. Complex ESP.

But even if she had just been making all of this up, there was no way to check. But it was probably true that the mansion hadn't suffered much damage.

Shinya-san returned from the phone. "Kanami's fine," he said. "She says she's in the atelier. Some paint cans fell off the shelf. It sounds like a big hassle, but at least she's not hurt."

"Should you go over there?"

He was her caretaker after all, and even if he hadn't been, he must've been worried about her, seeing as she couldn't walk.

"Nah, no need," he said with a shrug. "She would probably get ticked off if I did."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she told me not to come," he said with a pained expression of humility. "She says she's working right now. In fact, she's working on your portrait. Sounds like she's going to turn it into a real masterpiece, so I'd better not bother her."

"Even with Ibuki-san's talent, there's no hope if she used such a terrible model," Maki-san said.

"You really hate me, don't you?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded.

Geez.

Well, whatever. That's how life had always gone for me anyway.

I looked over at Hikari-san.

"Does this happen here a lot? Earthquakes, I mean."

"Not a lot, really. Shinya-san, you've been through a few, right?"

"Yes, but this one was unusually big."

"I wonder if any furniture fell over. I'm a little worried."

"If you're going to fix things up, I'll help."

"No, it wouldn't be right. Tomorrow we'll deal with it depending on Rei-san's orders."

She flashed a sweet smile. If she were a mother, her kids would grow up proper for sure. If we hadn't met in this kind of place under these kinds of circumstances, I definitely would've fallen for her. Or at least, I thought I would. It was never going to happen, but I thought so.

"Teehee. That was my first earthquake in a while," Kunagisa mumbled, tossing her blue hair around as she finally got up from the sofa. "I wonder if my computers are all right. They should be. If the epicenter was in Maizuru, the mansion should be okay, too. Boy, this takes me back to the Great Hanshin quake. Say, Ii-chan, you were already in Houston in those days, right?"

"Yup. For sure."

I vaguely remembered seeing something about it on the news back in my tiny room in America.

"That was a really tough time for me. I was still in Kobe back then. Most of my computers crashed permanently. I was so startled."

Was "startled" really the most appropriate word to describe living through that disaster?

"So shouldn't you be worried about your computers? You must be fully crammed with cheese by now. Let's go back to your room already."

It seemed like the time was right, so I decided to leave the living room. I didn't trust that I had the self-control to stay cool if I had to talk to Maki-san anymore. It seemed like a good time to split.

As if able to read my every thought, Maki-san's gaze burned a hole through my back, and it took every ounce of willpower in my body to ignore her. I pulled Kunagisa by the arm and took her back to her room.

The three PC's (I mean two PCs and one workstation) in her room remained securely situated in the computer rack, and the room had suffered no other damage.

Kunagisa let out a big yawn and stretched.

"Let's turn in already. Having a full stomach really makes you sleepy, huh? Ii-chan, undo my hair."

"Do it yourself, will you?"

"Come on, it's hard to undo a ponytail by myself. I'm not flexible. It's not that I can't do it, but I'll start aching. I've broken bones that way, y'know."

"I get it, I get it. You're really adorable, you know that?"

I removed the band from her hair and ran a comb through it. She let out a naughty little giggle. Once I was finished, she dove into bed. She sunk herself into the mattress and rolled around joyously.

"Take off that coat. How many times do I have to tell you? And aren't you hot?"

"This coat has special memories attached, so no dice."

What memories? Even our dear fortune-teller, Himena Maki, couldn't read Kunagisa's past. Maybe it had something to do what that "team."

"Anyway, Ii-chan, Kanami-chan and Akane-chan are pretty terrible, but you and Maki-chan don't seem to be on the best of terms either."

"Well, it's more like she harasses me for no reason," I said, thinking about how similar this was to what Kanami-san had said. "I don't have any problems with her in particular."

"Yeah, I'll bet. You're not aggressive enough to hate or resent people. At the very worst, you get miffed, isn't that right?"

"You think? That's interesting."

"Just joking," she snickered. "But Ii-chan, you've really never fallen in love with someone before, have you?"

"Nope."

"I love that about you."

Snicker snicker.

Strange. She was being weirdly feisty. I wondered if maybe that ginger ale had really been wine. I'd never seen her drunk before, so I couldn't imagine what she would be like.

"By the way, Tomo."

"Vat eez eet?"

"Do *you* have any special powers?"

"Hmm… if I did, I wouldn't mind at all," she said with a big grin. "I don't really want any, but one can always dream. It's better for Santa Claus to exist than for him not to, right? It's just like that."

"That's an odd point of view."

Even if she had special powers, she wouldn't mind.

Hmm, indeed. That was surprisingly insightful. Whether you had such abilities or not, it wouldn't have much of an effect on your daily life. Of course, now was a bit of an exception.

Because we were on this island?

Because we were on this island.

I'm gonna go back to my room and turn in, too. See ya tomorrow. If you're planning to sleep now, I'll come wake you tomorrow, so let's have breakfast together."

"Hey, Ii-chan," she called to me, still lying face-up on her bed. "Let's fool around." She beckoned to me.

I paused, just for a second. "No," I said.

"Weirdo. Good for nothing. Coward! Chicken pot pie!"

Yeah, yeah. I shut the door, went downstairs, and headed to my room. It would have been truly awful to run into Maki-san in the hallway or something, but luckily no such incident occurred. Perhaps she was still busy chatting it up with Shinya-san.

I found a key sticking out of the door to my room. Maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise, seeing as it was supposed to be a storage room, but I couldn't help wondering about being trapped inside if someone were to turn the key while I was asleep. There was no way I could reach the window even if I stood on the chair, so it really would be like solitary confinement. Then again, there was nothing anyone could gain by locking me up, so it was probably just excessive worry.

I entered the room, curled up on my futon, and stared at the ceiling in thought.

I was of course thinking about what Maki-san had said earlier.

Oh my, this part is fairly skewed. You stay by her side because you're jealous of her. And while you're jealous of her ability to express herself freely, she somehow looks unhappy, regardless of whether or not she really is. You see this girl who has everything you want and can do all the things you can't do, yet she is still, for some reason, unhappy, and that makes you feel better. That makes you feel like it doesn't matter if you can't get what you want.

"Ha!"

Dammit.

"She's exactly right."

Akane-san of the Seven Fools had described Kunagisa and I as a codependent pair, but really, Maki-san's opinion was closer to the truth.

To me, Kunagisa Tomo represented the thing I most wanted to be.

No, that wasn't it. That wasn't it. To me, she was…

She was…

"She was what?"

The reason I chose a university in Kyoto rather than Kobe was because she had moved to Kyoto. I also couldn't deny that she was one of the reasons I left Houston.

Why had I done all that?

As Maki-san had said, I wasn't aggressive enough to have feelings like love or hate. Even if someone were to bother me, it was a feeling no different from being annoyed when it rains. No matter how much disdain Maki-san had for me, no matter how many malicious comments Kanami-san spit at me, no emotion would ever build up inside me.

I couldn't help but wonder.

Was I really human?

I didn't understand other people's feelings at all.

If they really existed.

If superpowers like the ones Maki-san claimed to use really existed, perhaps I wanted some myself.

"Nah, I don't need that," I reconsidered.

If I could understand people's feelings, it would just make life all the more annoying. I wasn't looking for a life with an open Pandora's box. I didn't have the nerve for it.

"I'm just babbling nonsense here, dammit."

I hate vacation. I just end up thinking too much. Well, I don't know if it's really too much, but they're the kind of thoughts that can only lead to one's downfall.

Four more days.

I could be patient.

I didn't hate being patient.

Or at least, I was used to it.

Suffering and pain.

I was used to these things.

"Still, they don't feel too good."

Damn, I wanted to return to my peaceful life on the other side of the sea, I thought as I fell into the night.

But the following day I would realize that these past three days had been plenty peaceful.

THE FOURTH DAY

Ibuki Kanami, genius painter,
and her attendant,
Sakaki Shinya.

1

THE FIRST DECAPITATION

There's an up higher than up,
but at the very top, down is all there is.

1

It was a dreadful sight.

If I were to compare it to something, let's see, yeah, okay. Gruber Norbert's painting *The River*. The same sort of creepy, marble-colored river ran through the middle of Kanami's atelier, dividing it in half.

Seemingly due to the previous night's earthquake, cans of paint lay scattered around the room, and the simple, iron-pole shelf had fallen over as well. The earthquake had caused the shelf to tip, spilling cans everywhere, their contents dumped on the floor, and this "river" was the result. It was a feasible theory, and that's no doubt how it had happened.

But while this "river" was a bizarre enough spectacle on its own, the real issue lay on the opposite "riverbank." It was beyond imagination or speculation, and couldn't be written off as the earthquake's doing. An earthquake capable of this wouldn't be found on this Earth.

The facedown body of a person lay on the floor, with a noticeable vacancy from the neck up.

A headless corpse.

A *beheaded* corpse.

It didn't matter much what words you chose to describe it; it was what it was.

This body with the missing head was wearing the same dress Kanami-san had been wearing the previous day. That exquisite-looking dress that Kanami-san had boasted would never get dirty while she was painting was now stained red-black with blood. It didn't look wearable anymore.

What's more, there was no longer anyone to wear it.

Or let's be more specific.

The wearer was no longer alive.

"This is… grotesque," I uttered reflexively. It went without saying, but the words just came out.

The room smelled like paint thinner.

Next to Kanami-san's fallen body sat an overturned wheelchair and a single canvas. It was far away so I wasn't sure, but the painting appeared to have been my portrait.

It was beautiful, a masterwork. Even from this distance, separated by the river, I could tell. I felt the shock with my body, not with my mind. In some ways it was more disturbing than the sight of the headless body.

I recalled what Kanami-san had said the previous day. *It's not art if you get to pick who looks at it.*

Point taken. With this picture, I had no complaints.

Without a doubt, Ibuki Kanami was a genius.

To the point that it made me tremble.

And this made her death all the more devastating. It had been a long time since I had felt devastated by anything, but I was truly devastated by this.

By the death of Kanami-san.

The death of Ibuki Kanami.

"Why?"

Yes, Ibuki Kanami was dead.

I mean, who could stay alive after their head's been chopped off? Even Rasputin couldn't have survived a decapitation. And Kanami-san was just a physically normal human being.

"Well, we shouldn't just leave her like this," I said, breaking everyone's silence. I looked over at Kunagisa. Her lower lip stuck out dubiously, as if she had noticed something strange about Kanami-san's body. She appeared skeptical about something. But now probably wasn't the time to be thinking about such things. If I had to give a reason for each and every one of Kunagisa's actions, I would surely die.

As I tried to take a step forward, she tugged at my arm.

"Ii-chan, wait a sec."

"Huh? Why?"

"The paint isn't dry yet."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah."

Crouching down and checking with the tip of my finger, I found that she was right. My middle finger turned marble-colored.

"But now isn't really the time to worry about things like that."

There was a cut-up dead body right in front of us. To worry about dirtying your shoes at a time like this was beyond trivial.

"Hey, I said wait!" she said. Then, before I knew what she was getting at, she took off that black coat of hers and tossed it right in the middle of the river of paint. It was like a stepping-stone in the river.

"Wasn't that your precious coat?"

"Its time had come."

I tried to say something about her just tossing her memories off like they were nothing, but as she had said, there was a bigger issue at hand right now. Besides, what's done is done. With little recourse, I jumped to the coat, then to the other side of the river.

I groaned.

It had been quite awhile since I'd last seen a headless body. I removed my sweatshirt and placed it over Kanami-san's upper body.

I looked back toward the door, where everyone was standing, and slowly shook my head.

There was no point using words.

"Everyone," Iria finally said, "could I have us all gather in the dining room? I think we need to discuss what we'll do from here on out."

With that, she made her way for the hall. The four maids—Rei-san, Akari-san, Hikari-san, and Teruko-san—quickly followed close behind. Finally, the other guests began filing out of the atelier, two by two and three by three.

The last ones to remain in the room were Kunagisa, me, and Shinya-san.

He was staring at Kanami-san's body, his face pale and blank.

"Shinya-san…" Stepping back on the coat, I returned to the other side. "Let's go, there's nothing we can do here." It killed me to say it.

"Oh… yeah. Right."

His mind was off in a very different place. Despite his response, he made no attempt to move. He stood completely rigid, his mind unable to comprehend, *refusing* to comprehend the sight before his eyes.

I understood how he felt.

If the same thing had happened to Kunagisa, I probably would have been the same way. No, that's not right. I probably would have broken down and gone on a screaming rampage. I know that's hard to imagine for a guy like me, who, as Maki-san would say, was "dead to all emotions," but that's probably what would have happened.

In that respect, Shinya-san was truly admirable.

He didn't look too good, but at least he hadn't broken down. And he could even speak. His mental faculties remained intact, albeit just barely.

This is what separated him from me. I was just a kid.

Shinya-san was an adult.

I didn't know what kind of relationship Shinya-san and Kanami-san had, whether he was just her caretaker or something more, or perhaps something less.

However…

Remembering the sad look in his eyes the previous night…

And seeing him now, I somehow understood.

"Ii-chan, let's go ahead," Kunagisa said, pulling on my arm.

"Yeah."

And thus ended our tranquil lives on this island.

And thus began the next chapter.

2

The morning of the fourth day on the island had started extremely normal. Really, *extremely* normal.

I awoke the same as always. By the time I got to Kunagisa's room, she was already awake and sitting at her computers. She said she was checking her e-mail. "Do my hair," she said,

without so much as a "good morning." I put the hair on the top of her head in two tails, what we called a "twin tail." I figured it would be easy enough for her to undo it herself this time.

"I feel like breakfast today," she said, so we headed for the dining room. Peeking into the living room on the way, I found that Maki-san and Shinya-san were still there drinking wine. They must have been up all night drinking. "They sure aren't paying their age any mind," I thought, but of course I stayed quiet.

Out of courtesy, I invited them to breakfast and they accepted. The four of us entered the dining room. Sitting at the table were Akane-san and, making a rare appearance, Iria-san.

"Oh, what an unusual occurrence," Iria-san also said. "To have everyone gathered like this even in the morning… Well, I suppose it was inevitable. Shall I call in the others? It would be nice to all do breakfast together."

She summoned the nearby Akari-san and asked her to go fetch Yayoi-san, who was no doubt in the kitchen, and the other maids.

"Well, I'll go fetch Kanami-san," Shinya-san said. "She's probably all done painting by now anyway. Hmm, I wonder if she's still sleeping. Ehh, she doesn't get cranky in the morning. Despite her lousy personality."

He chuckled a bit at his own joke and looked at me. "Hope you're looking forward to seeing that picture," he said, and left the dining room.

It would have been the first time Kunagisa and I had done breakfast with the entire group, but it never actually happened.

When Shinya-san returned to the dining hall, what he brought was the news of Kanami-san's death.

"Kanami's been… murdered."

That's how he phrased it, anyway, but it was quite a bit of an understatement, if you ask me. There was no way she died of sickness or an accident, or even suicide—she had been beheaded.

Whatever the case.

This was a murder.

And not just a murder, but…

• • •

"Me? I was… right. After dinner, I was with Kunagisa the whole time. I took a bath in her room, then she said she was hungry, so we went to the living room. On the way we ran into Akari-san. Isn't that right? Right. In the living room we met Hikari-san, Maki-san, and Shinya-san, and then… the earthquake. There was an earthquake, right? We were in the living room until that earthquake occurred. After that, I took Kunagisa back to her room, and then… right, I went to sleep. I woke up today at six, and I've been with Kunagisa ever since." I tried my best to sound calm, even under everyone's gaze.

An alibi check.

Why we had to start with me, I don't know, but Iria-san had requested it, so there was no choice. It seemed she viewed me as the prime suspect.

The dining room.

Eating my slightly cold breakfast.

No one else seemed to be able to continue with breakfast after seeing the headless corpse, and indeed I was feeling

pretty squeamish myself but Yayoi-san's cooking was so good, I couldn't just let it all go to waste.

The round table.

Iria-san, Teruko-san, Rei-san, Yayoi-san, Shinya-san, Kunagisa Tomo, myself. Akane-san, Maki-san, Hikari-san, and Akari-san. Everyone was sitting in their assigned seats, with only Kanami-san's seat, at the five o'clock position, empty. It would never be filled.

Iria-san tilted her head at me a bit in response to my testimony. Then she glanced over at Hikari-san in the ten o'clock seat. "Hikari, is that true?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Up until the earthquake occurred… um… one o'clock, was it? Yes, one o'clock. The five of us including me were talking the whole time. I can vouch for that."

"Did anyone get up and leave for a while?"

"No," Hikari said with a bit of uncertainty. "I don't think so… although I couldn't say for certain."

"No one left," Kunagisa said, coming to her rescue. "And I've got a perfect memory. Nobody left the living room."

"Is that so?" Iria closed her eyes. "In that case, you and Kunagisa-san, Sakaki-san, Himena-san, and Hikari can all account for one another up until the earthquake, is that right? How about after the earthquake?"

"I slept alone, so I suppose I don't have an alibi."

"Thank you. Well then, I suppose I should go ahead and give my alibi next. Last night I was with Rei and Sashirono-san in my room talking. Yesterday's dinner was even more delicious than usual, so I was asking her about the recipe. Isn't that right, Sashirono-san?"

Possibly because her name had suddenly come up, Yayoi-san looked a bit startled. "Yes," she nodded quickly.

Rei-san shrugged a bit, but said nothing. If you thought about it, she must've been a really cool-headed person. Of course Teruko-san was quiet as ever, but Rei-san was more silent than you would have imagined. Whether she was just being loyal to her employer or this was just her natural personality, I wasn't sure.

"The earthquake happened, and… then I decided to go back to my room," she said as if struggling to remember.

"That's right," Iria-san nodded. "After that, Rei and I were up all night talking. Kunagisa-san will be leaving soon, so I thought we should discuss the idea of holding some kind of fun event… you know, like a farewell party. That's the tradition here. Anyway, we ended up forgoing sleep, so I just came straight here for breakfast."

In other words, Iria-san and Rei-san had perfect alibis. Yayoi-san, like Kunagisa and I, only had an alibi up until the earthquake.

"Shinya-san and I have complete alibis as well," Maki-san said. "Kunagisa-chan and the rest can confirm that up until the earthquake, and Shinya-san and I can vouch for each other after that. My, alcohol is just wonderful."

Just how trustworthy was a drunk person's testimony? Maki-san must've known I was thinking that, because she glared at me. But without a word to me, she turned to Shinya-san. "Isn't that right?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, right," he replied vacantly.

"Hmm… Hikari, what did you do after the earthquake?"

"I went back to our room. Akari and Teruko were there, too. After that, I went to bed. I woke up today at five o'clock, and then got back to…"

"What about Akari and Teruko then? Akari, answer."

"After dinner, we didn't have any work left to do, so…" she paused, with a hand to her cheek as she tried to think. "Teruko and I were together in our room the whole time. Then the earthquake happened, and Hikari came back soon after that. That's when we decided to go to bed."

"The three of you share one room?" I asked. Akari-san's eyes shot in my direction as if she never would've guessed I would speak up.

"Yes, the three of us share a room. Is something wrong with that?"

"Oh no, nothing."

Just wondering. I bowed to her. I wanted to ask if they shared the same futon as well, but I decided to stay quiet.

Hmm…

That meant that Akari-san and Teruko-san had solid alibis up until the earthquake as well. After that, they had all gone to bed, so they couldn't really vouch for one another.

Teruko-san nodded a bit after listening to Akari's testimony, but ultimately said nothing. It was a simple gesture, but somehow hard to understand.

"This is becoming quite complicated." Iria-san looked toward the last possible suspect, Sonoyama Akane-san. "What about you?" she said. "What were you doing last night?"

Akane-san, who had been closely observing the situation up until now with arms folded and mouth shut, let out a sigh. "Judging from the fact that nobody's mentioned my name up until now, it's probably pretty obvious, but, yep, I wasn't with

anyone last night." She spoke unhesitatingly. "After I finished dinner, I went back to my room and got on the computer. I was working on some modeling, and, well, I'll spare you the boring details. There should be a log, so you could check that for proof, but I suppose that kind of thing can be forged. I guess you couldn't call it an alibi."

"I don't know much about computers. What do you think, Kunagisa-san?"

"Hmm?" Kunagisa's head popped up (hell of a time to be daydreaming). "Oh. With a degree of skill, a person could easily manipulate something as simple as a log. Akane-chan, how much do you know about computers?"

Akane-san smirked. "There's probably no point in answering that."

"Oh, okay," Kunagisa nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. With the right tools, even an amateur could alter a log. It's not like it's very hard. You can find that kind of software all over the place."

"Isn't there a way to see if the log's been altered?" I asked.

"There is, but that can be faked, too. Just about anything's possible with a computer, you see, so it's hard to use one to confirm an alibi."

Kunagisa Tomo. Invited to this island as the leader of that "team." She was peerless in her field, so there was no way she was wrong. In which case, Akane-san had no alibi to speak of.

Akane-san let out another sigh. "But I suppose I have to make a defense for myself or else you'll have me on a cross. So I'll just go ahead and say it: I didn't do it. Certainly I hate artists, but I don't think they're worth killing. They're already dead when they're alive. It wouldn't be worth the effort. I had nothing to do."

She probably meant to say, "I had nothing to do with it," but at any rate, she didn't seem to be bluffing or playing tough, and it didn't seem like an act, either.

"Okay, everyone please hold on a minute. I need to work this out in my head."

"Um, before that, please hold on," I said to Iria-san. The conversation was growing bizarre. Hold on before we hold on? "Um, Iria-san, what exactly are you trying to do?"

"I'm sorry?"

"It's just that this all feels really strange to me, and… of course, this is your island and your mansion, so I know it's probably better not to say anything, plus I'm not even really a guest, but I'm asking anyway. What exactly are you trying to do?"

"Well. I'm trying to get to the bottom of this, of course," she smiled softly. "It seems pretty clear to me," she continued. "Ibuki-san was murdered by someone. And in this case, that means she was murdered by someone in this room. As you said, this is my island and my mansion. One of the guests I've invited here has been killed, and the murderer is right here. Surely you don't think we can just leave this alone?"

She glanced over the crowd with an ironic smile.

Indeed, she was right. This was a remote island. A remote, deserted island, completely isolated.

Wet Crow's Feather Island.

If there were twelve people on the island and one was killed, the murderer had to be one of the remaining eleven. Even elementary school students can do that sort of basic arithmetic.

"Gosh, another death," Iria-san said with a sigh.

Another? Did she just say "another"?

"And another decapitation, at that. Could it be that this island is cursed? Say, Himena-san, can you see into that?"

"You're the one who's cursed," Maki-san answered. "The island is just an island. If anything is cursed, it's you."

As disheartening a statement as that was, Iria-san replied with a strange smile. "Maybe so."

Ah, it all made sense. It had seemed strange to me that despite her attitude, Maki-san was able to get along so well with everyone other than me, but now I got it. Nobody else on this island cared about what other people said.

"Mmm, but this is a fairly simple case. Maybe there's no need for all this questioning. After all, the time of the incident is fairly laid out for us."

"Is it?"

"It is. You saw it, too, right? All that paint got knocked over during the earthquake, and Ibuki-san's body was lying on the other side. How wide do you suppose that river of paint was?"

Nobody ventured an answer, so I went ahead. "At a quick glance, I would've said about ten feet."

"Right, not that big but certainly not small enough to jump over. So we can confirm that the murder must have happened before the earthquake."

The shelf had fallen over in the quake, resulting in that marble-colored river. What did that mean? The quake must have been more intense than I had realized, but that's not all.

What did that river really mean?

"Hold on a second," Akane interrupted. She looked a bit concerned. "This conversation doesn't bode well for me. You know why?"

Why?

Everyone besides Akane-san had an alibi prior to the earthquake.

I was with Kunagisa the whole time. Same with Hikari-san, Maki-san, and Shinya-san. Same deal with Akari-san and Teruko-san. And of course, Iria-san, Rei-san, and Yayoi-san. Everyone had an alibi and could vouch for one another.

Iria-san was right. There was no way someone could jump that marble river of paint the earthquake had created. Likewise, there was no way to cross the river without stepping in the paint and creating footprints.

In which case…

The murder had to have happened before the earthquake. The only one with no alibi at that time was Akane-san. Indeed, this didn't bode well for her at all.

"Iria-san," she clucked. "I'm just going to ask you straight. Do you think I did it?" That certainly was straight.

"Yes," Iria-san admitted just as directly. "I mean, who else could have?"

Akane-san broke eye contact with Iria-san and said nothing. She was at a loss for an effective argument despite that Seven Fools brain of hers. Feeling some sliver of a connection with her somehow, I wanted to jump in and save her, but if a member of the Seven Fools couldn't think of a rebuttal, there was no way a program dropout could.

An awkwardness hung in the air for a while, but it was Kunagisa who broke it.

"That's wrong," she said. "I don't think that logic completely makes sense, Iria-chan."

"Oh? Why is that?" Iria-san seemed strangely glad to hear it. "Ah, I see. You're talking about the possibility of an

accomplice. I suppose there is that possibility. That would make everyone's alibis a little shaky."

"No, not that. Even if you don't consider an accomplice, you're missing something. Right, Ii-chan?"

"Huh?" I blurted out, completely surprised that I would be pulled into this.

"Come on, Ii-chan, tell her. About what happened last night."

"Last night… something happened?"

Looking fairly irritated, Kunagisa clammed up. This was a fairly rare thing for her.

"What can I say? Unlike you, I have a bad memory."

"Geez, you really don't remember? Your memory isn't bad, it's nonexistent! Do you always forget things this important? After the earthquake. Shinya-chan made a call to Kanami-chan, right?"

"Oh. Oh. Oh!"

Hikari-san and Shinya-san looked up in surprise.

That's right. Shinya-san had called Kanami-san after the quake and confirmed that she was okay. Confirmed that nothing had happened to her.

Wow, that *was* important, just like Kunagisa said. What did that mean though? What would happen now?

"In other words, Kanami-chan must have been killed after the earthquake."

"Hold on a sec," Iria-san said in a bit of a panic. "But that river of paint…"

"Well, Iria-chan, that must mean this…" she paused for a moment. "The atelier was locked."

Everyone exchanged glances for a moment.

That river of paint was unjumpable for sure. It was ten feet wide. Maybe it was possible if you were a long-jumper, but even then, there was no space to get a running start. If you considered that, the murder must have happened before the earthquake, just like Iria-san said, but then Shinya-san's story wouldn't have made sense. Immediately after the earthquake, Kanami-san had neither been killed nor harmed.

"Sakaki-san," Iria-san said, "that was Ibuki-san's voice for sure, right?"

He went even paler, with a confused expression written on his face. At last, he nodded. "Yeah, it was definitely Kanami. No mistake. She said she was busy, and that the paint had fallen over so everything was a mess. She had to have been alive after the earthquake."

"I heard Sakaki-san talking on the phone as well," Hikari-san told her mistress. "He asked me if he could use the house phone and… I think Ibuki-san must have been alive still."

"Yeah, she was still… he clutched his head in anguish. "If I had only gone to the atelier instead of neglecting my duties. Dammit! I'm scum! I'm nothing but scum!"

There wasn't much to say to that. Only that in the end, it wasn't earthquakes or blizzards or fire that was frightening.

It seems there is some kind of solace to be found in regret.

It serves as an escape from what's right before your eyes. You end up pinning all your bad deeds on the "former you." It's hardly what you would call self-condemnation.

When you are regretting something, you're technically being good.

I'm not saying Shinya-san was a monster. People are just wired that way. If anyone was a monster, it was me, for only being able to nitpick at people's flaws like this.

"This is starting to get strange," Akane-san said, stroking her chin. "According to Shinya-san, Hikari-san, and Kunagisa-san's testimony, the murder must have happened after the earthquake. But after the earthquake, the river of paint had already been formed, in which case there is nobody who could have killed her. In which case…"

"That's right, Akane-chan." Kunagisa interrupted. She had that look she gets when she's starting to find something interesting. "This is an incredibly strange situation."

"When you say the atelier was locked, you mean…" Iria-san nodded, seemingly convinced. "Hmm. Indeed, even now, that paint isn't dry, huh? Could there have been a way to climb over it and enter the room? Say, Akari, where's the house phone in Ibuki-san's atelier?"

"It's beside the window, on a phone stand," Akari-san answered with great certainty.

Iria-san crossed her arms and considered this. "Kunagisa-san, you've posed this question, but I don't suppose you know the answer already? Do you know who did it?"

"Nope," Kunagisa answered, strangely confident.

Of course, I didn't know, either.

Nobody knew.

"What about the window? Is it possible that the person entered through the window?" Shinya-san asked.

Hikari-san answered. "But it's the second floor. I don't think it's possible. And I'm pretty sure that window is locked from the inside, so—"

"So it can't be opened from the outside at all?"

"Probably," Hikari-san answered.

Check. So the window was impossible, and so was the door. It couldn't have happened before the earthquake *or* after the earthquake, so…

Okay.

We were at a complete dead end.

Everyone fell into silence once more. And then, eyes started shifting back toward Akane-san.

"Huh?" she seemed a little surprised. "Hey, I thought I had cleared myself."

"Maybe not," Iria-san said. "Clearing that paint river is impossible, right? So, ultimately, it *must* have been before the earthquake."

"What about what Shinya-san said?"

"He could've been tricked. Maybe it was an auditory hallucination or something."

Auditory hallucination? Nonsense. It was beyond nonsense. I had to say something.

"I think that's just what you want to believe," I said.

"I don't think so," Iria-san said, unfazed by my opinion. "Even supposing it wasn't auditory hallucination, it could have easily been some other sort of misunderstanding. There's no crossing that river of paint, that much is for sure. Thus, it's only logical to presume the murder happened before the earthquake, in which case it couldn't be anyone but Akane-san."

"This isn't good," Akane-san said, seeming truly worried. "I know this probably won't help my case any, but I can't help but feel like Akari-san and Teruko-san's alibi is a little sketchy. I mean, family members vouching for each other? It wouldn't hold up in a court of law."

"We're not talking about a court of law," Iria-san said flatly.

"I didn't think so," Akane-san said as if she expected such a response. "Still, determining the criminal by process of elimination doesn't make much sense. It's silly. And simply ignoring Sakaki-san's testimony isn't exactly what I would call logical thinking. It's selective thinking."

"Selective thinking?"

Akane-san shot me a look, as if to say, "Will you please explain?"

"A confirmation bias," I blurted, suddenly remembering from my program training that one is never to reveal his own stupidity to a "senior." "In other words, it means when you only consider testimonies and evidence that suit your opinion and write off all evidence to the contrary as some kind of fluke. Actually, they say that in supernatural ability experiments, they"—my eyes wandered over to Maki-san—"they use it a lot. 'Dry Love,' wasn't it? They obsess over any evidence that suggests these abilities exist while ignoring any evidence that suggests they don't. It's their way of getting desirable results, I guess."

"I don't really follow you."

I had gone to all that effort to remember these things, and here Iria-san wasn't even listening. What a waste of breath.

Akane-san sighed deep.

"I suppose Ibuki-san and I were on pretty awful terms, but still…"

I recalled their nasty bickering from the previous night's dinner. It didn't exactly do wonders for her case. Certainly it wasn't only Akane-san's lack of an alibi that made Iria-san doubt her so much, but this as well.

Of course, it wasn't that I didn't understand Iria-san's feelings. But if you took Shinya-san's testimony into account, even Akane-san couldn't be a suspect.

It was an uncommitable crime. There were no suspects. There was one victim and zero suspects. The situation didn't make any sense. And thus to fix it…

"Sakaki-san's testimony seems a little shady after all," Iria-san said, staring right at him. "Even if it's not a lie, it's got to be some kind of misperception or dream or some such."

"But I heard him talking on the phone," Hikari-san said.

Iria-san shook her head. "It's not like you heard Ibuki-san's voice, right? Sakaki-san is the only one who heard her voice directly, which means…"

"Come on, that's—" Shinya-san started to protest, but as if realizing he had no basis for an argument, he went silent.

"Hmm. Well, if that's the way it is, I guess there's no choice but to suspect me. That's one way to look at things, anyway," Akane-san said, almost as if she was talking about someone else. Even now, she didn't seem to be lying or acting. Sonoyama Akane, ER3 system, Seven Fools. She seemed all too used to this kind of pandemonium. "But still, you don't have any proof. Iria-san, even if you are the mistress of this island and this mansion, you wouldn't treat me like a criminal without any proof, would you? This may not be a court of law here, as you say, but it's not some dusty old detective novel, either, right? You can't just assume I'm the criminal based on this unformulaic process of elimination and selective thinking. Nobody can do that."

"But Sonoyama-san, you also can't prove that you're *not* the criminal."

"You can't ask the innocent to prove their innocence. You can't prove the unprovable. I'm innocent until proven guilty."

"You're talking law again."

Akane-san's shoulders slumped. "Well, what's your point, Iria-san? So I'm the prime suspect. Fine. That's absolutely right. I'm the only one with no alibi before the earthquake. Nobody could have entered the atelier after the earthquake. Sure, I'm with you on that, too. Therefore, Sakaki-san's testimony becomes suspicious. Makes sense. So what now?"

So…

What now?

"What should we do?" Iria-san looked around the table with a troubled expression. It seemed she hadn't thought any further than this. How anticlimactic.

"Throw me to the police or whatever you want," Akane-san said, brushing the bangs from her face.

Akane-san of the Seven Fools being sent off to the police?

"I hate the police," Iria-san said, still perplexed as she stared up at the ceiling. "Oh, what to do?"

A heaviness filled the air once again.

I whispered to Kunagisa. "Hey, Tomo."

"What's up, Ii-chan?"

"Isn't there some way to stop this witch hunt?"

"There is."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, but"—she looked up at me—"you ought to do it, not me."

"Yeah, okay," I nodded, then raised my hand.

Iria-san called on me with a confused look. "Yes, you." Ah, good. It was so nice not to be ignored.

"I have a suggestion."

"Yes?"

"How about using the room I've been staying in? It looks like you can only lock and unlock it from the outside. What if we kept Akane-san there for a while?"

"Kept her there?" She eyed me dubiously. "You mean like imprisonment?"

"Not imprisonment, exactly. Not imprisonment, just… a brief period of seclusion. Iria-san, I think the biggest thing we have to fear right now is that this turns into a string of murders. Kanami-san was killed. Okay, that's already said and done. I hate to be so frank about it, but what's done is done. But more important, we can't let anyone else die. The quickest way to deal with a situation like this is to isolate the prime suspect. If Akane-san really is the murderer, naturally she won't be able to commit any more murders. If, on the other hand, someone else used some kind of trick and managed to sneak in and kill Kanami-san after the earthquake, then that person would be brought to a standstill. After all, if they tried anything again, it would prove Akane-san's innocence."

I looked around to see people's responses.

"In other words, create an antagonistic environment, so that the killer can't move around. This includes Akane-san, as well as everyone else. The atelier may have been locked, but locked doors are made to be unlocked. There might have been some trick. There might not have been. That doesn't matter. What matters is that we don't know either way. Akane-san might have done it. Someone else might have. Even I might have. I might not. So I think the best thing to do is create a situation where the killer can't do anything."

"Ah, I get it," Yayoi-san said, a bit to my surprise. "That makes a lot of sense. I'd have to say I agree. I don't think there's a very solid basis for suspecting Sonoyama-san alone. Iria-san's reasoning seems rather arbitrary."

Iria-san gave her a quizzical look. Nonetheless. Yayoi-san continued.

"I don't think it's a bad idea. But you don't intend to just lock her up forever, right? In that awful room?"

Hey, I've been sleeping in that awful room, dammit.

Lousy bourgeoisie.

"Well, just until the police arrive. This is a private island, it shouldn't take more than a day or two to get an investigator out here."

"I'm not calling the police," Iria-san said, completely surprising me.

Eh? Pardon me, madame, what was the horrible thing you uttered?

"I mean, what's the point, right? Even if we call the police, they'll just figure Sonoyama-san was the criminal and it'll end there. The police won't do anything."

It wasn't Iria-san's words that I found suspicious, but her facial expression. The police won't do anything? Why did she say that with such a stern face?

"But we can't just not call the police. If we did that, there wouldn't be any point in confining her."

"Not necessarily. We just have to piece things together while she's in there. We'll track down the real culprit with evidence and reason. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

"Will *you* be the one investigating then, Iria-san?"

Something about Iria-san's idea of using "reason" didn't sit well with me at all. But to my surprise, she shook her head.

"No, not me, of course. Don't you remember? I told you yesterday, didn't I? In a week—no, six days—that wonderful, marvelous human being is coming to this island."

The detective of this proverbial mystery novel. Iria-san's favorite.

Iria-san's hero.

"Surely Aikawa-san will crush this problem to smithereens."

To smithereens. What an expression. And she didn't look like she was exaggerating, either.

"Six more days, huh?" Akane-san said cynically, letting her crossed arms drop down beside her. "Well, whatever. Fine fine fine. I know I'm not guilty, but if this is what it takes to convince you, what can I say? I presume we can trust this Aikawa-san?"

"Yes. Of course." Iria-san gave a confident nod. You could feel her utmost faith in this hero of hers just from looking at her.

Akane-san let out one more big sigh. "Fine. Let's do it then."

3

"I wonder if that was really the right thing to do," I said as I played with Kunagisa's hair. She said it was too heavy all tied up high like that and wanted me to redo it. Here I had thought it was adorable, but if she didn't like it, I had no choice.

Everybody had since split up, and the two of us had gone back to Kunagisa's room.

"I think it's okay. It's pretty much what I expected to happen. Akane-chan must be kinda grateful, too, eh? It's a way better idea than continuing that unproductive bickering, anyway."

"Hmm, I wonder…"

As the one who had suggested the idea in the first place, I couldn't imagine Akane-san was too happy about it. I felt a little guilty. It might well have been the only solution, but I couldn't help but wonder if there was some other way.

"All done."

"'Sankyuu." She crawled over to her computer rack and sat down with her back to me. Then she switched on the power and started typing away.

"I just… I feel like we've wronged Akane-san."

"Maybe so. But some things can't be avoided, y'know, Ii-chan?"

After breakfast, Akane-san had gone off to my room on her own two feet. It had been decided that Akari-san and the others would deliver meals to her directly, and that she would have to call them from the room phone every time she wanted to use the bathroom.

Akane-san had requested a reading lamp so she could pass the following six days reading books she had brought.

Six days… Objectively speaking, the room wasn't a particularly bad environment. But the door couldn't be unlocked from the inside and the window was way high up—there was virtually no means of escape. In that sense, it really was imprisonment.

Six days.

It really was too long to be locked up.

"If only Iria-san would call the police, we wouldn't have to do all this. It's like she's trying to cover up the incident altogether."

"But Iria-chan is right, y'know? If she had called the police, they would've blamed Akane-chan and closed the case right there. Or even if they didn't convict her, she would've been a suspect. I mean, wouldn't you want to avoid something like that? Seriously, one of the Seven Fools becoming a murder suspect?"

"Do you know a lot about the ER3, Tomo?"

"I've got a few acquaintances from over there. But I'm sure you know more than I do."

"Speaking of Seven Fools, Akane-san didn't have criminal immunity or anything, did she?"

"But it would be even worse of a situation for me, not to mention Yayoi-chan and Maki-chan, who are both well respected. Nobody needs a scandal like this to deal with. Of course the same goes for Iria-chan. So it's only natural that she isn't calling the police."

"Natural, huh?"

It was probably this island itself that was unnatural. But judging from Iria-san's manner, I got the feeling there was more to the story. Like she had some more fundamental reason for not wanting to call the cops.

"Do you suppose Iria-san has some specific reason for disliking the police?"

"Well, what if we asked her?"

"I doubt she'd tell us."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, why worry about it? Once this Aikawa character Iria-chan's so crazy about gets here, everything will be solved. It's just another six days."

"Yeah, but…"

Iria-san was the mistress of the island, and if she said no police, there was no going against her. For what it was worth, there would probably be no more murders with Akane-san locked in seclusion. But still…

"Say, Tomo."

"What, Ii-chan?"

"I want to ask a favor."

"I accept. What is it?"

"Can you do something about that locked door?

"I don't know, but for you, I'll try."

There was no need to spend the next six days just sitting around. I was the one who had proposed this course of action in the first place, so I had a duty to give the case some serious thought.

"If we can figure this case out quick, we won't have to keep Akane-chan locked up in there, whether she did it or not."

She swiveled her chair around to face me. She beckoned me closer. "Here, here." I walked over to the computers as told.

"For the time being, I've typed up everyone's alibis."

Ibuki Kanami (murdered)

Sonoyama Akane
Before earthquake: X
After earthquake: X

Kunagisa Tomo
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Hikari, Maki, Shinya)
After earthquake: X

Sashirono Yayoi
Before earthquake: O (Iria, Rei)
After earthquake: X

Chiga Akari
Before earthquake: Δ (Teruko)
After earthquake: X

Chiga Hikari
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Tomo, Maki, Shinya)
After earthquake: X

Chiga Teruko
Before earthquake: Δ (Akari)
After earthquake: X

Sakaki Shinya
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Tomo, Maki, Hikari)
After earthquake: O (Maki)

Handa Rei
Before earthquake: O (Iria, Yayoi)
After earthquake: Δ (Iria)

Himena Maki
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Tomo, Hikari, Shinya)
After earthquake: O (Shinya)

Akagami Iria
Before earthquake: O (Rei, Yayoi)
After earthquake: Δ (Rei)

"Look about right?"

"I understand the O's and X's, but what are those triangles?"

"Akane-chan was right about family testimonies. Iria-chan, Rei-chan, Akari-chan, Hikari-chan, and Teruko-chan seem like a pretty upstanding bunch, so for now, they get a check. It's just that, well, their alibis seem kind of shaky."

She scrolled down the screen and checked the alibi chart one more time.

"For now, let's ignore the possibility of an accomplice," I said. "And that includes family ties. If we assume that much, we can remove Shinya-san and Maki-san from the suspect list. Oh, and also Rei-san and Iria-san."

Four people down.

Seven people left.

"If Shinya-san's testimony was accurate, then the locked room with the paint becomes a problem. But if it was a lie, that means only Akane-san could have done it."

"I can't imagine why Shinya-chan would lie, though."

"Well, it could've been a misunderstanding or something rather than a lie."

Well, how about that.

I was starting to sound like Iria-san.

"But you know, Akane-san really is the prime suspect here, objectively speaking."

"Yeah, you can't help but think that, looking at this chart. No matter how fair or sympathetic you are, it doesn't change the fact that she's the only one without any smidgen of an alibi. If that weren't the case, she probably wouldn't have accepted this whole seclusion idea."

"Yeah, for sure. So, Tomo, do you think Akane-san did it?"

"I wouldn't say that. Like she said herself, there's no evidence. You can't decide who the criminal is by process of

elimination alone. We haven't even examined Kanami-chan's body yet, either."

"Ah, and I suppose there is still the fact that the room was locked."

"But if you take that into account, *nobody* could've done the crime. Ii-chan, you have any ideas about that?"

"I've got a few," I said as I pondered. "Maybe I'll figure something out after a little while. How about you, Tomo?"

"I've got tons of ideas," she said. "Just need to give it a little more thought and it should all fall into place. Oh, and Ii-chan? Whether or not Shinya-san's testimony is true, I think the murder happened after the earthquake."

"Huh? Why?"

"That picture of you. Do you really think she could've finished a picture like that before the earthquake? I don't think so."

"Well…"

It was tough to say. Kanami-san was pretty damn fast when it came to painting. But if what Kunagisa said was true, then it was all the more certain that the door had been locked. That wouldn't be the most helpful development in the case.

"And then there's the headless body itself."

I nodded.

Regardless of who killed her, why would they cut her head off?

"They say to beware of swapped identities when the bodies show up with no head, but I don't suppose there's any need for doubt in this particular case. There were twelve people, one had her head cut off, and now there are eleven. And we know exactly who and where those eleven people are."

"If it was one of those three maid sisters who got killed, it would've been a real problem, huh?" Kunagisa said. "But with Kanami-chan, there's probably no need to worry about it. If there were other people on this island it would be different, but y'know."

"We don't need to consider that notion, either. If we assume there are X number of other people on this island, all this narrowing down of suspects and alibi searching becomes pointless. I don't know what this 'detective' coming in six days will have to say about it, but for now let's just worry about the eleven people we know about."

"You said it," she said, gaping at the ceiling. "Now, if you consider the possibility of an accomplice or some kind of remote trickery, only you and I can be taken off the suspect list."

"Why me, too?" I said.

" 'Cuz I trust you," she answered coolly. "Still, why did it have to be a beheading? Body-switching is the only feasible reason I can think of. But I wonder… maybe that's not even how she died."

"Yeah. If it was, there wouldn't have been so little blood. It would've been more like a river of blood. But at a glance, there didn't appear to be any stabbing wounds or anything, so maybe she was poisoned or strangled. I mean, just to speculate."

"I wonder if she went down easy."

"Probably. Her legs didn't work, and even though her eyesight had come back, it definitely wasn't perfect. Once you approached her, the act of killing her probably wouldn't be very difficult. And cutting off the head wouldn't be much of a challenge, either."

As long as you didn't hesitate, it would only take a few minutes.

"There's no clear motive, either. Why did Kanami-san have to be murdered?"

"Nobody *has* to be murdered. But yeah, I wonder why. Aside from Shinya-chan, everyone here only just met Kanami-chan, right? Hmm, but maybe that's not the case. Maybe somebody actually had some connection with her before coming here. It wouldn't be so strange."

"I guess you could presume just about anything on that subject."

In which case, there was no point in presuming anything.

Kunagisa let out a groan.

"Well, let's just worry about these other details first, and figure out who knows who later on."

"How are we gonna do that?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" She grinned at me.

Of course.

This blue-haired girl had a "background," so to speak.

"Now then, shall we do a crime scene investigation?" She picked up her nearby digital camera.

4

On the way to Kanami-san's room, we passed by Yayoi-san. I meant to greet her, but there was something unapproachable about her, and I missed my chance. She continued walking in the opposite direction. We had passed right by each other, but it was like she hadn't even noticed our existence.

"I wonder what she's up to," Kunagisa said. "Something seems a little strange about her."

"She looked kind of worried about something. Or maybe just in deep thought."

"Hmph. Maybe she was looking around Kanami-chan's room, y'know? Maybe she had the same idea as us. Solve the case quick so we can all go home."

"Hmm, I wonder. She's been here the longest, right? I doubt she'd suddenly want to just pack up and leave."

"Eh, maybe. But personally I hate islands where murders take place."

"I *really* wonder about that."

Just before we all scattered from the dining room, Iria-san had laid down a rule. "Until Aikawa-san gets here in six days, nobody leaves the island. We're all suspects here, myself included."

In other words, Akane-san wasn't the only one being imprisoned. And it wasn't just curiosity motivating Kunagisa to dig deeper. She wanted to go home as planned. As lazy as she was, she was strangely anal about plans.

"Well, either way is good. I certainly wouldn't mind if Yayoi-chan solved this case for us."

"I don't think that's what she's up to. She had a sort of melancholy, somber vibe about her. I can't help but wonder if she was disposing of evidence or something."

"That would certainly suck a lot for us," Kunagisa said, eyeing me through the digital camera. "Let's hurry up and check it out."

Kanami-san's door had been left open. You could see the inside of the outward-opening door. Nobody seemed to be around. I wondered what everyone else was doing, except Akane-san, who was presumably in the storage room. But I decided to set that thought aside for the time being. People

will do as they please, insofar as they're allowed. That was true on this island, and it was true anywhere else.

The room smelled like paint thinner as usual, but the paint seemed to mostly be dry by now. Kanami-san's body remained in the same place it had been this morning, and looked otherwise exactly the same.

"So let's check it out…"

There's something terribly… *comical* about a headless body. What makes dead bodies so creepy and terrifying is that emotionless expression on the face, but with no head to display that face, the creepiness and terror is replaced with hilarity. It's like looking at a screwed-up attempt at a plastic model or something.

The marble river. Kunagisa's tossed coat remained right in the middle.

"By the way, about that coat. How much was it?"

"It was part of a two-piece set for about twenty thousand, I think."

"Dollars?"

"Nah, yen."

Wow, an average price. I was a little surprised.

"Well, might as well go inside." I tried to take a step forward, but she tugged on my sleeve just like she had that morning. "What now?"

"Try jumping."

"Huh?"

"C'mon. It's an experiment. Get a little running start here and see if you can jump that paint river. Your athletic skills aren't so bad, right?"

"They're not so good, either."

"Give it a shot."

"You got it."

I revved myself up a bit and gave my best leap, but as expected, I couldn't clear the river. I landed on both feet, only slightly past the center point.

"That's all you're gonna get."

"Hmm." Kunagisa stepped across, using her coat as a stepping-stone. "If you can't even do it, Shinya-san's the only person here who might even have a chance. He's the only other guy and all."

"Yeah, but those maids seem pretty able-bodied, to be honest. I mean, they carried all your luggage, including those PCs and the workstation. Those things ain't light."

"Yeah, but they're all petite. It's just a matter of width. Hmm, but then again, people always say ability matches necessity. I guess that detail is a little fuzzy. Now, let's see what's going on with Kanami-chan." She approached Kanami-san's body, camera in hand.

She seemed to be particularly interested in examining the body, while I was more concerned with Kanami-san's canvases. There were several lying around, including the cherry blossom picture she had smashed up, as well as the redo. I had to tremble at the sight of it. Even I, who had not so much as a passing interest in art or aesthetics, couldn't deny that I was looking at sheer, untainted beauty.

And then there was the picture I had modeled for. Kanami-san had promised to give it to me, but I couldn't accept something like this. I didn't have nerves of steel, after all.

"I'm probably just babbling here, but…"

I went to pick up the painting, but then stopped myself. It might have been bad to leave any fingerprints behind. Then again, it might not have mattered.

Huh?

"Hey, Tomo."

"Yeah?"

"Isn't there something weird about this painting?"

"You mean that picture of you? Hmm? What's weird? It's a normal painting."

Certainly Kunagisa's taste wasn't the most ordinary thing in the world, either, but that was beside the point. Something about the painting was off, in a maddeningly subtle way. It wasn't anything about the image itself, but just the strange feeling of absurdity it somehow conveyed.

"Well anyway, go ahead and snap a picture of it, will ya? Something about it bothers me."

"Got it. Hmm, I'm still not finding anything unusual over here."

She appeared to be inspecting Kanami-san's body.

"Really?" I said, walking over to her.

"Yep. I'm no professional though. The cause of death is still a mystery, and I can't narrow down the time of death, either. Without a coroner, it's probably impossible. If only Iria-chan had invited a medical genius here, too. Y'know, like Blackjack or something. Then again, even with a coroner, it would probably be pretty hard without the body's head."

"I guess we're not going to figure anything out here after all."

"Yep." She lifted the corpse up under her arm. Even years she had no qualms about touching a dead body. "Kinda takes me back, y'know? It's just like the old days."

"Yeah, you're right, but… It doesn't feel like that to me. It's like I'm seeing a dead body for the first time all over again. It's been bothering me for a while."

There was this sort of an unspeakable, disconcerting feeling. Like when you find a scar on your own body you don't remember having.

"It's *jamais vu*."

"It's what?"

"The opposite of déjà vu. It means you feel like you're doing something for the first time, even though you've really done it many times before. Supposedly it happens when your senses have been numbed."

Then my senses must have been numbed some time long ago.

A lot of things had happened abroad, after all.

"Anyway," Kunagisa said. "There aren't any stab wounds. So maybe she was strangled after all. And then to hide the bruises, the killer cut her head off."

"It sounds crazy, but… here's what I don't get. Whatever the killer used to cut the head off—knife, ax, hatchet, whatever it was—why didn't they just use that to kill her?"

"Maybe they did. There are no stab wounds, but that's just on the body. Maybe they stabbed her in the head."

"Hey yeah, maybe," I said. "Speaking of that, where do you suppose the head went? I wonder where the killer took it. I mean, *if* the killer took it."

"Half the island is forest. Maybe they buried if somewhere out there. Or they could've tossed it out to sea. Disposal probably wasn't much of a problem."

"Which brings us back to the question, why did the killer cut her head off?"

But that question was a dead end.

"I've got one more question, Ii-chan. Take a look at this. The head is cut off from the very base of the neck, right? Why is it cut like that? Don't you think that if you were going to decapitate someone, the normal place to make the cut would be around the center of the neck?"

The position of the cut was indeed unnaturally low, but I wouldn't have thought it was something significant.

I crossed my arms and said nothing. This crime scene investigation didn't seem like it would yield any clues after all. At best, we had confirmed that the river of paint couldn't be jumped. But that seemed more like a step backward than progress.

Kunagisa went over to the phone stand by the window and picked up the phone receiver.

"Hmm, nothing unusual here, either."

"You thought there would be?"

"I thought maybe the circuit had been rigged so that calls to this phone would connect to a different phone. But there doesn't seem to be anything wrong on this end. Doesn't look like it's been tinkered with, either."

"The phone, huh? Say, how'd it go again? What did Kanami-san say to Shinya-san?"

"The paint spilled, I'm busy working so don't bother me, stuff like that. But Shinya-san should've gone to check on her even if she told him not to. It may seem strict, but it's his duty as a caretaker."

"You're right about that. But there's no use talking about what's already done."

And anyway, Shinya-san already has to bear that burden himself. It wasn't particularly our place to lay the blame on

him, and there was no need to do so. It's a crazy world, but it's also a world where we have to take responsibility for our own actions. And sometimes we also have to take responsibility for our own lack of action.

"Is it possible that they restored the phone back to normal afterward?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it's totally impossible, but it practically is. It's not like plugging and unplugging a cord or something."

"Yeah, good point. I guess we'll have to look at other possibilities. Like the locked door."

"You think I was lying?"

Suddenly I heard Shinya-san's voice from behind me, so I spun around. He stood in the doorway with some kind of orange bag in his hands.

"But I could hear Kanami's voice for sure. That's no lie."

From the sound of his voice, he seemed pretty worn out. Which probably goes without saying.

"I'm not saying you lied, Shinya-san. We don't have anything that certain. But is it *possible* that the voice you heard wasn't hers?"

"No," he answered. "I'd known Kanami for a long time. There's no way I would mistake her voice. Are you doubting me?"

"It's not like that. There's no reason you would have killed her, after all."

"I dunno, maybe we weren't on the best of terms." He gave a weak smile. Then he stepped through the dried paint and approached us. Upon closer inspection, it became clear what the orange bag was. It was a sleeping bag. He looked up at me. "We can't just leave her here, right?" he said. "I got permission

from Iria-san and everything. I've decided to bury her on the mountain out back. It's not like Iria-san's going to call the police, and this is all her property anyway. Burying Kanami is all I can do now."

"We'll help you," I said. He tried to think of an appropriate response, but realizing the benefit of having two extra people helping him, he said nothing.

Together we lifted up Kanami-san's body and silently put it inside the sleeping bag. I know it goes without saying, but her flesh was completely devoid of warmth.

"Shinya-san, do you have something to dig with?"

"There should be a big shovel back by the entrance. Kunagisa-chan, shall we have you carry it for us? Hmm, say, is that a digital camera?"

"Yup." Kunagisa nodded. "We have to keep a record of the crime scene for when Mister Detective shows up. I don't think the corpse will demand publicity rights, after all, right?"

That was probably the worst way she could've phrased it, but Shinya-san responded with a nod and a smirk. "I see. Shall we go, then?"

"Um, Shinya-san? About this painting…"

"Hmm? Ah. Kanami's painting. It's nice, isn't it? It's the last painting she ever did, but she was intending to give it to you, so please take it."

"Is it okay?"

"I want to honor her last wishes."

Her last wishes.

Yes, she was dead. Nothing left to fulfill.

"Get her feet, will you? I'll carry the head, and—" He cut himself off, most likely realizing there was no head to carry. Without saying anything, I picked up the legs.

He no doubt wished he could bury the head with the body, but its whereabouts remained unknown. Either the killer was hiding it somewhere, or it had already been tossed into the woods or thrown into the sea, like Kunagisa said.

Holding on to the legs, it occurred to me how heavy the body was. Heavier than you'd expect. It probably wasn't impossible for a single person to carry, but two people was definitely better.

From that point on, none of us spoke. In silence we lifted her body and left the mansion; in silence we headed for the mountain in the back; and in silence we dug a hole.

The sleeping bag that held her body was such a cheap-looking orange excuse for a coffin, I couldn't help but find it comical. In that moment, I felt like human death is nothing but a big joke.

People die. That was something I knew all too well, to the point that it was stifling, to the point that I wanted to vomit, and Kunagisa knew it, too. And Shinya-san, being a full-fledged adult, had no doubt been touched by death in the past as well.

That's probably why we were all so quiet.

Finally, Shinya-san spoke. "You two can go back now," he said. "I'm going to stay here a little longer."

I wanted to say something, but I didn't. Kunagisa pulled on my hand, and we left without a word. Maybe Shinya-san was going to cry. Maybe not. Either way, we no longer had a reason to linger.

After all, we were just bystanders.

"I wonder if it was okay to just go ahead and bury her," Kunagisa said.

"I think so. Shinya-san seems to be the only thing she had resembling a loved one, and that's what he wanted to do. And we couldn't just leave her lying in the atelier all week."

"True. True, but…"

"Say, Tomo. How big a crime do you suppose it is to abandon a corpse?"

"You'd probably get less than a three-year sentence. But you'd probably get off with parole, too. But you and I are both underage anyway, so no worries. No matter what happens, we can get off with a little money."

What a tasteless conversation.

Not that I was looking for a tasteful one.

"I'm just babbling here…"

Kunagisa gave me a funny look.

Sonoyama Akane,
member of the Seven Fools.

2

THE TRAGEDY OF 0.14

What exactly were you trying to do?

1

Lunch was prepared by Hikari-san. Yayoi-san had complained of being under the weather and was now resting in her room. Indeed, she did seem pretty pale when we passed her in the hall.

"It's nothing like what Yayoi-san makes us, but please enjoy," Hikari-san said with a shy smile, and then left the dining room. That left only me and Kunagisa… and Maki-san, who seemed to be in the middle of lunch. I did my best to ignore her as I crammed Hikari-san's cooking down my throat. Kunagisa didn't seem to be hungry, so she was just tagging along, staring off into space.

"Hey, boy-o." As expected, Maki-san was going to harass me. "Looks like you've been having some fun, eh? Eh?"

"Isn't this what you said would happen?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"That things will get worse before they get better. Isn't that what you said at dinner yesterday? What a lovely precognition that was."

"I sense a bit of sarcasm there, but I'll go ahead and take that as a compliment."

"If you knew this was going to happen, couldn't you have prevented it?"

"No. All I can do is watch and listen. I think you're misunderstanding my abilities. Psychic abilities aren't such a great convenience. I told you before, didn't I? It's like watching TV. Can *you* alter the contents of a TV show?"

She gave a mocking smile as she shoveled down her meal.

Something about her resembled Kunagisa, I thought. She was so emotionally immature, yet at the same time she seemed somehow enlightened. In the aftermath of Kanami-san's murder, she seemed completely unfazed. In fact, it didn't seem like *anything* could faze her.

"Then please inform us, what's going to happen next?"

"Sure. If you pay me."

Suddenly she looked furious, and without another word, she got up and stormed out of the dining room. Why was she so mad?

"That was cold of you, Ii-chan."

"*What* was?"

"Forget it. If you're done eating, let's go back to my room. We've got things to do."

"Yeah, okay."

Maki-san must just have been a moody person. I decided to assume that was the case and give it no further thought. I didn't know what darkness lurked in the heart of someone who knew everything.

We returned to Kunagisa's room. First we unloaded the digital photos onto her PC with a USB cord. Then she switched on the workstation and inserted a floppy disk.

"What's on the disk?" I asked.

"Tools. My original creations, of course. It's set up so that they only run on this workstation, so even if I drop the CD it's okay. Now let's get to the bottom of this."

To put it plainly, what Kunagisa was about to do was illegal.

But I guess you could also call it "research."

Including Kanami-san, there were twelve people. Excluding Kunagisa and me, there were ten. As planned, Kunagisa was going to run a background check on these ten people and find out who knew whom.

Kanami-san had been murdered. There must have been a reason for that. Of course, there are those murders that occur for no apparent reason, but the other type is overwhelmingly, absolutely, and depressingly more common. Supposedly everyone here had met for the first time on the island, but what if that wasn't the case? The possibility was there, and just thinking about it wouldn't do much good.

And thus it was time for Kunagisa Tomo, leader of the "team" that had thrown the cyberworld of the previous century into total chaos, to act.

"So what now?"

"First I'm gonna access the hi-spec machine I've got back home. This workstation doesn't have the power we need."

"Even though it's got so many terabytes?"

"This has nothing to do with that. Ii-chan, you really don't know anything, do you?"

"Quit saying that. I might not know as much as you, but I know a little. I took an electronic engineering class back in Houston, at least."

"Really? Sounds like a lie to me. Weren't you the one who always used to have to go to the convenience store and be like 'Will you copy this disk for me? Here's ten yen'?"

"That was before I went to Houston."

Curse that memory of hers.

"Well, whatever. That's Ii-chan for ya," she said. "Anyway, then I'm gonna set up ten UG servers at platforms and contact Chii-kun."

"Chii-kun? Never heard that name before."

But I could've guessed it was a member of the "team." I asked if it was, and she nodded.

"Chii-kun was mainly in charge of 'seeking.' There's nothing in the universe he can't track down."

In the universe?

This was a freakish pack of talented people indeed.

"He's got a terrible personality, but he's a good guy."

"He's not the guy who made that operating system, is he? That was Atchan, right? So what's this Chii-kun doing nowadays?"

"He's in prison. He got a 150-year sentence. Oh, plus eight years—158 years. He kept hacking on his own even after the team disbanded, and tried to crack the G-eight database, but he was caught. He made it pretty far, but he got stuck at the eighty-eighth line of defense. Hehe, if you get too good at something, it's always the easy stuff that gets you in the end."

"You sure know a lot about it."

"Yup. I was the one who designed that line of defense."

I made no reply.

"I had heard a rumor that Chii-kun was after top-secret UN information. I couldn't just let the situation be, so I

contacted a few friends and we set up a defense. Even then it was a close call, which is a testament to his skill."

"So that's how he got thrown in prison? You really think he'll help us? In fact, how *can* he help us from prison? They don't have the Internet in there, do they?

"There's always an exception to the rule, y'know. And Chii-kun happens to be pretty exceptional. And he'll definitely help out. Chii-kun's not the type to sweat the small stuff."

She continued typing away even while she talked. I already had no idea what she was doing.

"Why do you call him Chii-kun?"

"His Net handle is Cheetah."

"Kind of a smarmy handle, huh?"

"Yeah, well, he's a fast guy. He says he's hit cars before."

"What, you mean while driving?"

"No, while running. I'm pretty sure he was the first person in Japan to be fined for hitting a car while on foot."

How's that for eccentric?

Did Tomo attract these kinds of people like a magnet?

Nah, maybe talent just attracted like talent.

"Don't ever introduce us."

He sounded like the kind of person I'd rather quietly observe from a distance.

Kunagisa nodded. "You got it. We all have rules, after all. We never introduce friends to each other no matter what. 'Cuz friends aren't information. I don't want you introducing me to any of your friends, either, Ii-chan."

"Sure… So I guess I'll just leave all this up to you then? If you're going to be talking to that guy, I probably shouldn't be hanging around, huh? And I've got a few places to go, too."

"Peace out," Kunagisa saluted.

With that, I left her room and made my way down the spiral staircase. There I paused for a deep breath, and began down the hallway. I was on my way to Iria-san's room. Hikari-san had given me directions earlier, so I didn't think there was any danger of getting lost.

Even in a mansion like this, where everything was of the finest quality, the door to her room was of exceptional craftsmanship. I doubted whether the sound of my knocking would even reach the other side of such a chunky door. Nonetheless, after giving it a try, the wave of sound did somehow appear to reach the inside, and my knock was answered with a "Come in!"

I opened the door and went inside. The room was probably twice the size of Kunagisa's. It wasn't straight out of a movie, it was an entire movie in and of itself. It was like the legendary Urashima Taro.

The words *receive an audience* came to mind.

Head maid Rei-san sat on the sofa with Iria-san standing beside her. They must've been in the middle of a conversation.

Iria-san tilted her head at me. "Is something the matter? Um…" Her expression was clueless. It seemed she had forgotten my name. Or rather, couldn't remember ever having said or heard my name.

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Certainly. Please take a seat there."

I was thrown off by her cooperativeness. As ordered, I sat myself on her sofa, which was even swankier than the sofa in Kunagisa's room. It was like sitting on air.

"I didn't get much sleep last night. I was about to go to bed, so please keep it short." She slowly began removing her dress as she spoke, presumably to change into her sleepwear. Rei-san immediately rose to her feet, but hesitated to raise complaint with Iria-san's actions and ultimately said nothing.

Seriously, this was about what you'd expect from a "woman of pedigree." The gaze of a mere plebeian meant nothing to her. What a crock.

"Iria-san, why won't you call the police?"

My question brought her to a halt. "I believe I've already explained that. If we call the police now, they'll treat Sonoyama-san like the criminal."

"But isn't that what we're doing already? We've already locked her up. And aren't we committing crimes here?"

"Sheltering a criminal, imprisonment, and… abandonment of a corpse, right?" She continued changing. "So what's wrong with that? Murder, theft—those are crimes. And Sonoyama-san isn't being imprisoned, really. She gave consent. And besides, aren't *you* the one who suggested it in the first place?"

Indeed, that was the case.

There was nothing I could say to that.

Iria-san continued.

"The people gathered here are the VIPs of the world. I refuse to allow them to become victims of the boorish government. And why call for excess meddling? Nobody wants that. Plus"—she grinned—"no matter who did it, I don't intend on subjecting anyone here to the law. Even if it means exercising the full wealth of my family's foundation, I'll be protecting them."

"Why?"

"Because geniuses are above the law."

Of that, she sounded totally sure of herself. But her words didn't sit well with me. It meant that if Shinya-san or I were the criminal, she wouldn't protect us.

God, what a feeling.

What a crappy, crappy feeling.

"How do you define the word *genius*?" Iria-san suddenly asked.

"Well, doesn't Kretchmar describe it as 'an individual capable of having a strong and extraordinary impact on the assertive values of a vast variety of people'?" I answered after a moment's thought.

"I asked for your opinion."

Seriously, what a crappy feeling.

But really, she was right. After another moment's thought, I answered once again.

"Someone who's 'far away.' "

"That's right," Iria-san said. "That answer is spot-on."

"I get the feeling there's some other reason you won't call the police, but…"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying. It doesn't mean anything."

"Well then, are we done here? I want to go to bed."

What a waste of time. It was like we were having a prescripted debate.

"Sorry I bothered you," I said and rose from the sofa.

Rei-san stood up with me. "I'll see you out."

"You don't have to do that, Rei," Iria-san said.

"It's okay, it's my job, right? Please excuse me, madam."

Rei-san and I left the room together. It felt rather like I had been given the brush-off, but, well, I had expected as much

for now. It would take more than a modest effort to convince someone like Iria-san, I thought.

"Please don't feel bad about what she said," Rei-san said softly on the way out. "She's not the most sensitive person."

"Sure."

Come to think of it, this was the first time I had spoken with Rei-san like this.

"I don't really mind anyway."

"She's really so fond of Aikawa-san, you see. That's why she doesn't want to call the police."

"Aikawa? Oh yeah, this person coming in six days."

"For her, this is sort of a welcoming present. You see, Aikawa-san's got a knack for these kinds of incidents, and, well, it's no coincidence that my mistress uses the term *detective*."

Interesting. So this whole murder fiasco was sort of a present for this Aikawa guy. If that was the truth, he must've been a hell of a guy.

No.

To say it plainly, maybe this whole incident was just Iria-san's way of killing time. Island-exiled heiress to the Akagami Foundation. She certainly had no lack of money or time. And she had already gathered all these geniuses here for her amusement. Could it be that this murder was just some sort of… special event?

I shook my head. I was thinking too much. There aren't people like that out there. People like that can't exist in this world.

"Well, please excuse me now."

Rei-san bowed to me in front of the door and I went back the way I had come. After talking, she had turned out to be an

unexpectedly nice girl, so I was a bit taken aback. Hikari-san had made her out to be so strict.

Thinking about that made me feel a little funny as I returned to Kunagisa's room and opened the door. Inside the room Kunagisa was face-to-face with her computer rack, and one more person—that ultimate, unrivaled fortune-teller. Why?

Maki-san was smoking, but once I entered, she put out the cigarette with her own index finger. She rose from the sofa and approached to pass me without a word. But as if changing her mind midway, she butted her head into my chest and pushed me out the door with her. With a hand behind her back, she shut the door.

I eyed her suspiciously.

"Heh, heh, heh," she laughed childishly. But that's all she did, without even attempting to speak.

"In a better mood now?"

"It's not just my mood that's improved. Hehehe. You're so careless. Or maybe just rash?"

"What brought this on?"

"Do you have a favorite author?"

This conversation was all over the place.

"No."

"How about celebrity?"

"No."

"You're so boring. Fine. Well, you know how *some* people have someone they admire, right? But those people fall into three different categories. There are those who think 'I love this person, I admire him, I respect him, I want to be just like him.' Innocent, right? Then the second type is similar to the first, but they separate themselves completely from the object

of their admiration, and even hold that person's life above their own. And finally, the third type of person is the one who thinks that by taking an interest in this wonderful person, they can absorb some of that wonderfulness and increase their own worth in turn. It's a despicable, rotten-minded breed of people who only live for others. Now which one of those three types do you belong to?"

"The second one, I suppose."

"Correct. And twisted as it may be, even I can't help but be moved by your loyalty to Kunagisa-chan," she sneered. "But with that said, aren't you being awfully careless? Leaving her all alone in her room like that? What if I was the killer?

"If you really, truly want to take care of something, you shouldn't let it leave your sight even for a second. Keep that in mind, boy."

Pat pat.

She smacked me twice on the shoulder and disappeared, singing some tune.

I was left alone in the hallway.

"Huh?"

Dammit.

I cursed to myself and then opened the door to Kunagisa's room and entered once again.

2

With the usual rules apparently still in effect, come dinnertime almost everyone was gathered around the table.

Almost.

Naturally Kanami-san wasn't around, and Akane-san was absent as well. Additionally missing were Akari-san and

Teruko-san. Apparently they had crossed to the mainland. The reason for this was that they needed to contact our dear detective, "Aikawa-san."

"Couldn't you just call or e-mail him?" I asked.

"We can't," Hikari-san said. "Aikawa-san is famously difficult to reach. It's a busy life, I guess, and I believe there's something going on in Aichi Prefecture right now. So Akari and Teruko won't be back until tomorrow."

"Busy life, huh? What's this person do?"

"Independent contracting."

What's that?

I wasn't entirely familiar with that kind of lingo.

This night's dinner was Chinese food. According to Sashirono Yayoi, master of flavors, Chinese was the quickest and easiest food to make. Of course, that was from her perspective, so it probably wouldn't serve as reference for me in my own cooking anytime soon.

"By the way, Kunagisa-san," Iria-san said just as dinner was ending. "I hear you were conducting some covert ops this afternoon. Did you figure anything out? I thought you were a mechanical specialist, but you can conduct these types of investigations as well, huh?"

"I do all sorts of stuff," Kunagisa said with sweet-and-sour pork crammed into her mouth. "No need to tie myself down with specialties and such."

That sounded familiar.

Ah… right. They were Kanami-san's words.

The words of a style-free painter.

Regardless of your strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, there's no need to specialize. This was a fundamental teaching at the ER program as well. Yet in a world that

categorizes everything, that was no easy teaching to adhere to. It began and ended with the likes of Kunagisa Tomo, Ibuki Kanami, and Sonoyama Akane.

For me, it was an impossibility.

"So, did you figure anything out? About how they broke into the room or who the killer was or anything?"

It sounded more like she *didn't* want Kunagisa to figure anything out. I recalled what Rei-san had said earlier. Granted, if the case was solved before Aikawa-san got here, it would be something of a killjoy for Iria-san.

"I know it all. I know so much, I don't know."

Nobody seemed to understand what Kunagisa was talking about, instead eyeing her skeptically and saying nothing.

"Himena-san," Iria-san switched the conversation from the engineer to the fortune-teller. "Since coming here you've put all your effort into harassing the other guests, and have yet to do any fortune-telling. So how about it? Don't you think it's time to tell us what's going to happen next?"

"It'll cost you."

She was living here for free, and receiving a regular salary, and she still had the nerve to demand a fee? What a money-grubbing atrocity of a human being. I had never met a person like this before. She was like the devil.

"You're one to talk."

She was glaring at me.

I wasn't talking, dammit.

"Well, it sounds the same to me. I use my abilities to make a profit. I'm not so young that I can stay motivated by morality and humanity alone. Especially in terms of emotional age."

I understood what she was saying. But she must have already had enough ten-thousand-yen bills to fill ten Tokyo Domes, so what more did she want? It wouldn't hurt for her to tell fortunes for free every once in a while.

"Who gave you the right to think that?"

She snapped her attention back to Iria-san.

"Of course I'll pay for it." Iria-san put her hands together. "Please, I'm asking you."

"It ends soon."

Maki-san spoke without even changing her tone of voice. Everybody waited for her to continue, but she was already fully invested in her twice-cooked pork. It looked like that was all she had to say.

"Is that all?" Iria-san asked, evidently somewhat surprised. "I have to say, that was a little, um…"

"That was charity. Since *somebody* over there has so many complaints about me, I thought I'd be a little generous. Don't worry about it. It has nothing to do with the fortune."

Himena Maki.

Just what is it like to know everything and stay silent about it? For someone like me who knows nothing, it was impossible to even imagine. In that sense, Maki-san was, for me, the biggest mystery on this whole island. So much so that the mystery of the headless body and the locked door and river of paint were all blotted out.

After that, Maki-san said nothing more, and so the fourth night's dinner ended without any significant developments. Maki-san and Kunagisa made a few bizarre comments as usual, and that was it.

Yet there was one thing that bothered me. Shinya-san and Yayoi-san hadn't said a single word the entire time, and they

didn't even appear to be listening to anyone else's conversation. They just sat there putting food in their mouths, just because it was there. It wasn't so remarkable, but there was definitely something unnatural about the two of them. It was one thing for Shinya-san, who had lost Kanami-san, to be like that, but what was Yayoi-san's issue? Granted, she had complained of feeling "under the weather" earlier, but…

3

Just past nine o'clock p.m.

I was alone in Kunagisa's room, viewing the digital camera data on the one PC that looked like even I could (just barely) operate it. It had no mouse, making it difficult to control, but it wasn't completely over my head.

Kanami-san's corpse. A shot from the chest up as well as a full-body shot. A shot of the severed neck and a shot of the river of paint. In the middle of the river floated a coat. The paint having dried and hardened, we couldn't remove it. I suppose we could have forced the coat out, but it was already ruined with paint, so there was no point.

And finally…

The picture I had modeled for, Kanami-san's final work.

That unnatural feeling I had felt when first seeing the canvas during our crime scene investigation had returned.

Disharmony.

It was alien.

It was all just a gut feeling, but…

"Ah, I get it," I muttered to myself.

Of course. Now that I saw it, it was so simple. The bigger mystery was why it had taken me so long to spot it. It was such an obvious picture flaw.

"Hmm…"

But this just raised further questions.

How could something like this happen? There was no reason something like this should happen. How could an artist of Kanami-san's caliber make such a simple error?

As I thought about it, somebody knocked on the door.

"Aw, come on."

It had to be Maki-san, here to harass me again. I rose from my seat, more delighted than ever. But when I opened the door, it was actually Hikari-san. Thrown into confusion by how far off my guess had been, I stared at her for two or three seconds with no brain functionality.

"Ah, hey, Hikari-san." Somehow I managed to string the words together. "Uh, please, come in."

"Sorry to bother you," she said politely, and entered the room. She glanced around the room for a moment and then asked me, "Um, where might I find Kunagisa-san?"

"Oh, Kunagisa? I tied her up and tossed her in the tub just a minute ago."

"Huh?"

"She's like a cat. She hates taking baths. Her hair is actually supposed to be a much lighter blue, but she never washes it so it gets all dark like that. She's no good at escaping, and once she gets wet she just kind of gives up, so she could be in there for a while."

"Oh… ohhh, so she's kind of like a Russian Blue, huh?"

Though Hikari-san wore an expression of dawned enlightenment, what she said didn't make any sense.

Seriously, I didn't know what she was talking about. Better to just ignore it.

"Um, so anyway, if you need to talk to her, I'm sorry but you're probably going to have to wait awhile." Then a thought occurred to me. Maybe this was a good opportunity. "Say, Hikari-san, are you free right now?"

"Hmm? Sure. I've finished all my work for the day, anyway."

"Then would you mind staying here for a while? It might be dangerous for me to leave Kunagisa alone," I said, recalling Maki-san's lecture this afternoon. "It should be fine now that we've made it hard for the killer to do anything, but, just in case. Do you mind?"

"No, it's okay. I guess." she said, though she wore a troubled expression. "Of course I don't mind, but is it really okay? I mean… to trust me?"

"No one would attack both of you at the same time."

"No, I mean, you don't think you're leaving her vulnerable?"

Oh, that.

"It's okay," I nodded. "Unlike Maki-san, I trust you."

With that, I shut the door and headed down the hall, then descended the stairs to the first floor.

" 'I trust you'?" I muttered, mocking myself.

Since when was I the type to make such grandiose claims? Didn't sound like me.

Question.

What is trust?

Answer.

Not minding if you're betrayed.

Not regretting if you're betrayed.

"Either way, it doesn't mean much of anything, does it?"

I arrived at my destination, once my own room, now Sonoyama Akane's prison.

"It's me," I said, knocking lightly.

"Oh, you" came her reply after a moment. She sounded surprisingly calm. "What's up? Should you be away from Kunagisa-chan? It doesn't seem like you."

"Well, I had my own hesitations, but… I wanted to apologize to you."

"Why should you apologize?" came her reply from the other side of the door, slightly laced with crankiness. "Weren't you the one who stood up for me? Coming here and apologizing is like saying I'm too much of a thickheaded imbecile to even understand that. If anything, I should be thanking you.

"I should've suggested this in the first place, but that probably wouldn't have gone over so well, so I was thankful when you brought it up. I should express my gratitude right now." She paused for a moment. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She hadn't risen to the ranks of the Seven Fools for nothin'. That wasn't the kind of forgiving place where you could get by with just a little studying and a sharp wit.

"By the way, when Hikari-san brought my dinner, she mentioned you guys have been snooping around a bit. You and Kunagisa-chan. Mind if I ask about your findings?"

"Well, I still don't know who the killer is."

"*You* still don't know, huh? Heh, should I be reading into that? Heh heh, I like your style. Okay, sure. Let me ask a different question. Got any theories on that river of paint?"

"Hm, how about you?"

"I think it's a case of the post hoc fallacy."

"Is that English?"

"Latin. I think it's sort of like 'you reap what you sow.' "

Ah.

I sighed.

In that case, she must have already figured out the secret of the river of paint. She had already figured out the mystery, and now she was just staying here to preserve this "antagonistic atmosphere" we had created for the killer. She was really an amazing woman, I thought.

Hehehe, she laughed.

"It's probably best that I stay in here until Iria-san's lover boy 'Aikawa-san' gets here, huh? It's no real problem for me, anyway. I used to lock myself in my room and read all the time when I was a kid. And that room was way smaller than this."

"Do you know who the killer is?"

"No, I don't. That's no lie, seriously. That kind of thing isn't my specialty, and although I do read the occasional mystery novel, it's only for recreation. Say, do you ever read Mushanokoji?"

The subject had changed without so much as a segue. Was Mushanokoji even a mystery novel author? "I've read the anthology, at least," I answered with a slightly confused look on my face.

"Then you must know the story 'Sensei of Truth.' "

I did know that much.

"When I first read it, I thought the title was 'Mari-sensei' and that it was about a horribly brash woman. Not that I can talk. But do you remember in the opening of the story, when Shinri-sensei refers to the 'reason killing isn't okay'?"

"Yeah, he's like, 'Is there ever a time when you wouldn't mind being killed? If you can think of a condition under which you wouldn't mind being killed, please let me know. If you don't like the thought of being killed under any circumstance, then you have no right to kill another,' right?"

Even with a memory as bad as mine, this much had stuck with me.

"Correct," Akane-san said. "Now let me ask you the same question. Under what condition would you feel it's okay to be killed?"

"There isn't one."

"But what if, for example, you had to choose between your life or Kunagisa-chan's?"

"I don't want to think about it."

"Right?" She laughed lightheartedly. "After all, you're the type who hates making decisions, right? You dislike the act of deciding in and of itself. Yesterday, Himena-san was saying the same thing about you, and I think she nailed it. You just go with the flow. You hate competition, and you hate making things clear-cut. You have to keep things ambiguous."

"I won't argue with that."

"You won't argue but you won't agree. You accepted my shogi challenge because you knew you would *definitely* lose, isn't that right? You wouldn't accept a challenge or compete otherwise."

I didn't hate losing, I hated competition. I was thoroughly put off by the idea of vying with others over something. I hated fighting as well and thus never made friends.

"Do you dislike other people?"

"Not particularly."

"But do you like them?"

"Not necessarily."

"That's right. The foundation of your values rests on the idea that people are meant to live solitary lives. That's your opinion, yes? Or no, rather that's your *will*. That's the absolute principle around which you're constructed. You try your best not to get involved and not to cause trouble or pain for anyone. Of course you can share happiness and good times with others, but you don't get close to the point that you might cause pain or sadness, isn't that right?"

I always thought couples who spend all their time fighting and stay together all the same were just idiotic. Why don't they get along? Couldn't they just do that much?

Why couldn't they?

"Since when were you such a psychologist, Akane-san?"

"Sorry, but I'm a scholar of any and all subjects. Such categorization is meaningless to me. Hehehe. You really, truly enjoy being alone, don't you?"

"Well, after all. I'm my oldest friend."

"True enough. That's the case for everyone. So how about Kunagisa-chan? Altogether, you've spent less than a year with her, right?"

"Do you like her?"

It was a straight question.

I had been asked the same one several years ago. That time it was her older brother who asked.

However the answer remained the same.

"Not especially, no." My voice came out so despairingly cold that I almost wondered if it was really mine.

Why?

Why was I being like this?

"Hmm, is that so?" She sounded a little surprised. "Because she likes you, you know. That much is certain."

"Yeah, I know. She's told me more than a few times."

"I don't particularly like this kind of discussion, but, have you ever wondered why even though the world is full of couples like this, somehow so many people are still getting together?"

"I mean isn't it strange? It would be too convenient for the person you like to ever like you back. Life isn't a shojo manga. But sure enough, in reality, you take a group of a hundred people, a whole lot of them are going to find love. Why do you think that is?"

"I have no idea. I've never thought about it. Isn't it just coincidence? Like the Law of Great Numbers of something?"

"I don't think so. A coincidence like that is unfeasible. This is the conclusion I've reached: it's because it feels good to be loved. Being loved by another person is enough to make you happy and make you love that person in return," she said assertively. I could see her clever little smile even through the door. This was becoming more than I could bear much longer. I felt like I was about to be crushed to death.

"So what are you getting at?"

"Oh, no, no… I was just wondering why you hadn't fallen for Kunagisa-chan, and you know how it is for us scholars. If we can't figure something out, it'll bother us to no end."

"She likes everyone. Seriously, everyone. It's not like she wants me in particular," I blurted out.

"So that's it," Akane-san said. "You don't want to be loved by her. You want to be *chosen* by her. As her one and only."

I…

Couldn't argue with that.

"Hmm, but why her? That's what I can't figure out. It seems like there must be some obvious reason, but I don't get it. If you two were a couple, there would certainly be some clashing factors, right? In fact, one would think you would be unattracted to someone so easy."

Easy?

Who?

"You mean easy*going*?" I said.

"Right. Anyway, theoretically someone with a personality like yours wouldn't be able to endure a relationship with a girl like that, emotionally immature despite being in a superior position. Plus, you're a man."

"It's fun being with her. Or well…" I chose my words carefully. "Rather, it's fun being by her side."

My favorite place in the world was by her side. I had returned to Japan for that very reason.

"Mmm-hmm," Akane-san said. "You're a little masochistic, aren't you?"

"Yeah, to the bone. I got bullied in elementary school, see."

"You were bullied? No, I think this is different. I think you were neglected. There's a difference between abuse and neglect. It's the weak kids and the liars who get abused. The outcasts just get neglected. But I know how you feel. When I was in high school, I felt like I was surrounded by aliens. When we took tests, nobody shot for a perfect grade, they shot for the average. If we ran a marathon, they would say 'Hey, let's all run together!' They were a bunch of egalitarians, for better or worse. They would tell you pi equals three. Indeed, each of the other Seven Fools claims to have experienced similar feelings. It's the tragedy of 0.14. In a

world of egalitarians, the outliers get to taste true isolation. Genius is born of it. But not all outcasts are geniuses."

"You mean it's a condition of being a genius, not a guarantor, huh? Well I'm sure no genius."

"Maybe not, but I think you at least know the difference between advice and an order, so let me give you some friendly advice: if you want Kunagisa-chan to choose you, I recommend you just take her. If you do that, you'll be the only one for her. She won't resist, that much is for sure. Regardless of how introverted, dark, disturbed, and deprived of an adolescent you may be, I'm sure you at least have the balls to do that."

"I don't."

"You're a real mallard, huh?"

A what?

"I may lack confidence, but you think I'm a *coward*?"

At least I wasn't a Chii-kun.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Hehehehe, I like you, y'know? It's too bad you aren't a woman."

Why was that?

I didn't know what she was trying to say anymore. No, that's wrong. It was simply becoming too painful to keep myself together any longer.

If this went on any longer, any longer at all…

"Well, it's okay. I'm sure everything will become clear soon enough. Time always gives things some clarity. Say, by the way, have you ever heard the theory that in zero-sum games like shogi and chess there's always one perfect move to make?"

"Is this like the Prisoners' Dilemma?"

"Yeah, that. The movement of the shogi pieces is mathematically limited, so there is always one perfect move to

make. Thus, it's technically possible to decide the match in the very first move. Of course, this assumes that both opponents are perfect players. So how about the killer in our case? How will this Aikawa-san respond, I wonder? Isn't it a fascinating notion? Still, this mystery feels more like a labyrinth than a shogi board."

"A labyrinth? But labyrinths are simple. If you just stick your hand on one wall, you'll eventually find the way out. It just takes time."

"You're talking about a simple maze. I think this case is more like a multiconnected labyrinth. Still, there's a surefire strategy for this kind of labyrinth as well, but it's kind of hard to explain. If you have a chance, try looking it up. But don't you ever want to play a game with no surefire strategy?"

A game with no sure strategy.

No sure win…

Huh.

What if this case was like that?

Anxiety.

Like standing on shaky legs.

I felt sick.

"If you think about it," she continued. This sickening conversation. Even though it was sickening.

"Um, Akane-san?" I said, at last unable to contain myself. "I'd like to keep talking like this, but I've left someone waiting in my room." I forced the words together into a sentence. I fought the urge to throw up. "I think I'd better get back."

"Oh, okay. Sorry about that," she replied.

It must have been a bit of a letdown.

"Anyway, please come again. You sure help pass the time."

"Thanks. Well, see you later."

With that, I began to leave, but there was something that still bothered me. I knocked once again.

"Um, about your original question…"

"Hmm? What's up?"

"Do you have one? An instance where you wouldn't mind being killed?"

"An instance? Not an instance—always." It was a clear answer. "I'll die when my time is up. Regardless of where or how I die, or who kills me for what reasons, you won't hear a complaint out of me."

And with that I returned to Kunagisa's room, never thinking for a second that this would be my final interaction with Sonoyama Akane, that genius of geniuses of the highest order, of the Seven Fools, of the comprehensive research center ER3…

4

"Ii-chan, you're back." Kunagisa sat on her bed, her body wrapped in a pure white bathrobe. Hikari-san was on the sofa. Seeing that I had returned, she breathed a sigh of relief. Trying to handle a conversation with a bath-fresh, spunky Kunagisa was no task for an amateur, so I knew how Hikari-san felt.

"Ii-chan, look, I washed my hair. Compliment me, compliment me."

"It's cute."

Her hair had turned a pretty, cobalt blue. "It's not easy bearing recessive genes," she herself would often say.

"Are you gonna take a bath, too, Ii-chan? You might come up with a good idea in there, y'know, like Archimedes. And then run around the mansion naked, also like him."

"That would be… a problem," Hikari-san said in all seriousness. It was like she thought I would really do it. I had no intention of making myself the mansion weirdo. "But Archimedes really was a strange guy, wasn't he? All geniuses are, huh?" Hikari-san said thoughtfully. I wondered which person in the mansion she was imagining. It looked as if it could have been anyone or no one.

"Nudity wasn't so uncommon in those days, Hikari-san. I don't think he was being particularly strange."

"You're so wise, Ii-chan."

"Yes, I am. So Hikari-san, what was it you needed?"

"Oh, right. My mistress sent me to come investigate what's going on with Kunagisa-san."

She was sure an honest girl. I told her there was no point if she went and told us that's what she was doing. She laughed embarrassedly.

"I know. Akari's really better at this kind of thing, but she'll be staying on the mainland tonight. She won't be back until tomorrow morning."

"She went to call on that detective, right?" I was a little bit interested, so I went ahead and asked. "So, what's this person like, anyway? Judging from the way you talk, it sounds like you've met before. Are you well acquainted?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Aikawa-san came to our rescue once before. There was an incident, and, well…" she vaguely trailed off. It didn't seem like it was supposed to be a secret, but maybe just an unpleasant conversation.

"Hmm, an incident, huh? On this island?"

"Yes. This was right after my mistress had been sent here, and before it had become this sort of 'salon.' So we called Aikawa-san here, and, well, the case was solved almost

immediately," Hikari-san said with great emotion. "Aikawa-san has kind of a violent temper, you see. Cynical and emotional, like the entire world is an enemy. I think Aikawa-san's success in solving cases is fueled by rage alone."

"Huh…"

She seemed to be carefully choosing her words as she spoke, but not very effectively. I couldn't put together a concrete picture of this guy at all.

"So, pretty short-tempered?"

"Well, it's more like Aikawa-san is in a perpetual state of rage. Even if you catch a glimpse of a smile, there's always this sort of hostility hanging in the air, and… I'm sorry, it's kind of hard to describe. Anyway, it's like Aikawa-san has a grudge against the whole world."

"I see," I said, even though I didn't. "But all the detectives I've ever read about in mystery novels are all so cool and reserved. They're always saying stuff like 'Didn't you realize that?' You could replace eighty percent of their dialogue with 'What are you, *stupid*?' and it would still make sense.

"But based on what you're saying, this Aikawa-san sounds like some sort of hotheaded defender of justice with zero tolerance for criminals."

"Oh, well, it's not like that. It's not just zero tolerance for criminals, it's zero tolerance for the entire world. You know, always saying things like 'This world could be so much better! Why are you bastards all slacking?' "

He really was hotheaded. A rare type of person these days. It was such a contrast to me and my vague, passive babbling, it was almost beautiful.

"But despite all the anger and grouchiness, it just doesn't do any good to get frustrated with the laziness of others, so

Aikawa-san would just give this cynical smile. Maybe you know the type. To say the least, it serves as quite a contrast from you and Kunagisa-san."

In describing this detective, Hikari-san seemed sort of gleeful. Like she was boasting about a close friend or something. Or more like a hero. It was just like when Iria-san had described him.

"Is that right? Well, that's probably the better way to be," I said, just trying to keep the conversation going. "Do you think Aikawa-san is reliable?"

"Yes, for sure."

"That's a relief. Even if we can't figure out the mystery in the next six days, we have a backup savior."

"Well, let's not count our chickens before they hatch."

"I'm cautious. Or maybe I'm a coward. Either way is good, I guess."

"Either way is good?" She gave me a confused look. "You know, this may be strange coming from me, but why is everyone able to stay so calm in a situation like this?"

"Well, that's a complicated question."

"Sorry. But you know, it's like, even though someone was killed, everyone is so… what can I say…?"

"Maybe they're just used to it."

At least, that was *my* case.

I didn't really know the difference between "used to" and "numb to," though.

"Yeah, but Shinya-chan and Yayoi-chan seemed to react pretty naturally," Kunagisa said.

"That's right, but hey, Hikari-san, you and your sisters seem pretty calm, too. What about that?"

"Well, we've been trained to maintain composure." She sounded a little sad about it.

Her twenty-seven years of living probably hadn't been much of a cakewalk.

"Oh, right," she said, breaking the awkward silence with the snap of her fingers. "My mistress told me to make sure I ask you this. Earlier you said something about understanding so much that you don't understand, right? But really you must know something, right?"

About that space enclosed by a river of paint.

Hmm…

That "mistress" of hers must've been sharper than she was worldly.

"Nothing to brag about, really. Any mystery novel fan would've been able to solve it easily. But you know, when you're approached with a mystery like this in real life, it proves to be pretty perplexing. I guess the answers get a little drowned out by the smell of blood, the taste of death."

"Hahaha, weird, Ii-chan," Kunagisa laughed.

It was an innocent, vulnerable laugh.

It made my head spin a little.

Did I want to be chosen?

By her?

My sudden silence drew the quizzical gaze of Hikari-san, but a moment later she turned to Kunagisa. "Um, Tomo-san? If you do know, I hope that you'll tell me."

"Sure, why not? It took awhile to pin it down, but I finally figured it out," Kunagisa nodded. "Erm, where should I start?"

"Um, well first, if you wouldn't mind… could you tell me what you meant earlier? About knowing so much you don't know?"

"It's like the difference between bottom-up and top-down," I cut in, lacking faith in Kunagisa's ability to explain it. "Like, say, for example, that that table is a sandbox and you want to make a mound of sand as high as possible. What would you do?"

"Start from the sides and push all the sand together into a mountain."

"Right. So would I. But Kunagisa wouldn't do that. She would take a whole bunch of sand and just dump it on the table. The resulting mountain of sand would be just like the one you and I built. You and I would gradually build up to the final product, little by little. Kunagisa dumps everything out altogether. That's how her mind processes things. Right, Tomo?"

"I don't really get your analogy."

Big surprise there.

At any rate, Hikari-san seemed to get me, and she nodded along.

"Okay, so will you tell me the secret behind that paint room?"

"Sure, if you'll answer my question, Hikari-chan."

Hikari-san stared blankly back at her, as if she didn't understand the question. Kunagisa, paying no mind to that, turned back to her computer. She pointed to the screen on the computer I had been using.

"Okay, first let's review the scene of the crime. Ta-daaa. The atelier."

She used an image viewer program to display all of the pictures. That stream of marble like the Sanzu River. The headless body on the other side. Images that actualized our

memories of the morning. Oblivious to such notions, Kunagisa began her explanation.

"The primary puzzle is this river of paint. The earthquake happened at one a.m., causing the shelf to fall over, which resulted in what you now see. That much is clear. The river is too wide to jump. If we suppose the murder happened after the earthquake, the killer's means of entry are a mystery. Or at least, the means of exit are. You with me so far?"

"Yes. So far."

"At this point, it's easy to pin the crime on the monster Ashinaga Tenaga, but the answer isn't that simple."

Hikari-san gave a strange laugh. Either she didn't know who Ashinaga Tenaga was or she was just giving a strange laugh.

"So you're forced to think that the murder happened before the earthquake. If that were the case, it would've been easy for the murderer to get in and out. No footprints, no blocked passages. In which case, it seems like Akane-san must be the killer, since she was the only one who didn't have an alibi. But that's where Shinya-san's testimony comes in. He confirmed that he heard Kanami-san's voice when he called her *after* the earthquake. This means that Kanami-san must have been alive at least for a few minutes after the earthquake. So, Hikari-san, what do you think?"

"Well, I, uh…" She tilted her head to the side. It was pretty adorable. "I guess the killer must've come through the window. It's the only other way. But the window is locked, so…"

"From the window, huh? There is that possibility. Glass is fundamentally closer to a liquid than a solid, after all, so a lock

might not necessarily do much good. Or they could have dug a tunnel as well."

Yeah, right.

"Well, you must've figured it out by this point, right, Kunagisa?"

"Not even a little."

"It's the post hoc fallacy, Hikari-san," I said, coming to her rescue. I had been holding out so long because she was so cute when she was confused, but in the end I couldn't help but feel bad for her.

Kunagisa nodded.

"Yup. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc.* In Japanese, that's 'mistaken cause and effect.' It refers to a misinterpretation of the Law of Syllogism. You know, like false assumptions. The world isn't so neatly organized."

"I don't understand Latin."

"Hey, but you knew it was Latin."

"That's because you said *ergo*"

Cogito ergo sum, huh?

Hikari-san was sharper than she looked.

"For example, imagine I've got a hundred-yen coin and I say 'It's going to come up heads.' I said it, okay? And then I toss the coin. Okay, it's heads! What do you think? You think it was a coincidence, right? That's normal. But some people don't get it. They figure I said I would throw a heads and it was heads, therefore I must have some kind of special power to control the coin."

For the record, it was a trick coin.

"I drank some alcohol and my cold went away, therefore alcohol cures colds. I turned on my computer and a visitor showed up, therefore computers summon visitors. A man

looked at a woman, and she happened to be looking in his direction, therefore she must have been interested in him. A catfish was dancing, and then an earthquake happened, so the earthquake must have been the catfish's fault. None of that makes much sense, right, Hikari-chan? In other words, just because B happens after A doesn't mean A and B have a cause-effect relationship. The sequence and timing of two events is no reflection of cause and effect. So let's think about this case now. *There was an earthquake, then a river of paint was formed, therefore the earthquake created the river of paint.* Is that right?"

"Oh."

Oh. That.

It finally dawned on her.

"So that river wasn't caused by the earthquake?"

"Well, the shelf itself probably really did fall over because of it. And it probably did cause a little bit of paint to spill out. Kanami-chan even said so on the phone. But I doubt it would've caused such an incredible amount of paint to spill everywhere. The paint cans probably rolled around and let a few drops out. If you think about it, those paint can lids are relatively strong, so it's not likely that just falling over would've caused them to spill all over the place like that. But even if was just a little bit, Kanami-chan was confined to a wheelchair, so for her it was impossible to leave the atelier."

"Oh, I see where this is going," Hikari-san said. "That makes sense. So then the killer snuck into the room and murdered her. Then, on the way out, purposely spilled paint around the room, little by little. If you did it slowly, little by little, you could make a river like that without leaving any

footprints." She appeared to be imagining the killer walking around with a can of paint as she talked.

Yup. We had all assumed that the earthquake had caused the river of paint. But in reality, it didn't take a major disaster or even a major artist to make something like that. It could've been the work of any amateur.

No artistic talent required.

It wasn't a very demanding task, to say the least.

"But why would the killer do that?"

"Probably to make us think it happened because of the quake," I said. "They must not have known Kanami-san talked to Shinya-san on the phone. So they figured by making the river, people would naturally assume it was caused by the quake."

"So this means…"

"Yup. It means," I said, clapping my hands together once and then spreading them out wide, "the suspect list just got way longer."

There were only four people with post-earthquake alibis: Iria-san and Rei-san, and then Maki-san and Shinya-san. The remaining people were no longer cleared of suspicion.

"So then there's no point in keeping Sonoyama-san locked up, right?" Hikari-san said cheerfully. "I mean, right? She's not the only one under suspicion anymore."

She must have been feeling pretty guilty about how we had treated Akane-san. It seemed she wasn't much of a mathematical thinker. It was quite a contrast from the rational Sonoyama Akane herself. I decided to tell her.

"Akane-san already knew about the paint trick, too. She's just pretending she doesn't know."

"Why?" Hikari-san said, looking honestly baffled. "Isn't that strange? Why would she do something like that?"

"Probably to preserve this safety situation we've got here. That brain of hers sure keeps busy."

To create the best possible circumstances for everyone else, she didn't even have any reservation about putting herself in the worst possible circumstances. It was almost an inhuman way of thinking, but extremely admirable nonetheless.

"So we should keep this a secret then, huh?"

"Yeah. The killer is still at large, so I don't think it would be good to upset the situation any. I suppose Iria-san has a right to know, though. As far as that goes, do whatever you like."

I wasn't going to be that much of a roadblock.

Hikari-san let out a moan. "But it's so… I mean, that thing about the river not really being caused by the earthquake… it's so *simple*. Like I should've seen it a long time ago."

"Yeah, I couldn't believe it, either. But you know, any trick seems simple once you figure it out. By now I've seen tons of tricks that were even stupider."

"But who could've possibly thought up such a trick right after the earthquake?" She was still unconvinced. "I mean, what were the odds there was even going to be an earthquake? It's all too much of a coincidence."

"Well, that brings us to the Law of Great Numbers, Hikari-chan."

"What is that?" Hikari-san gave Kunagisa a sideways glance. "The Law of Great Numbers?"

"It means that something looks like an amazing coincidence, but when you sit down and think about it, it's not really so amazing after all. Like, for example, if you saw

someone win the lottery, wouldn't you think it was amazing? You're less likely to hit the jackpot than to spot a tear in the ocean. But if you think about it, that's only true if the guy only bought one lottery ticket. Practically nobody who plays the lottery only buys one ticket, one time. If you have a group of twenty-three people, there's a fifty percent chance two of them will have the same birthday. Even still, it seems incredible, right? That's the Law of Great Numbers. The earthquake just happened to come today, but it wouldn't have changed anything if it had happened tomorrow instead. Plus, it's not likely that the killer was counting on this earthquake trick alone. They probably considered a whole variety of ideas. It's the same concept."

"So you mean like multiple means to one end?"

"Yup yup, you got it. And it all relates back to that misunderstanding of cause and effect," Kunagisa said, poking Hikari-san with her index finger. "Now, Hikari-chan. It's time for my question."

"Oh, that's right. We made a deal," she righted her posture and nodded. "Go ahead, ask me anything."

"Why is Iria-chan here?"

It was a question that immediately changed the entire atmosphere.

Here.

This island.

Wet Crow's Feather Island.

Why was Akagami Iria here?

In a single instant, Hikari-san's usual cheerful demeanor went completely stiff. She was clearly trembling. It wasn't confusion, but utter fear, pure and simple.

Was it really that bad?

"Um, uh, well…" her voice wavered, unable to put the words together. "Well, um, that's…"

"You can't answer?"

"Just that one question—please don't make me, Tomo-san." She hung her head, as if she might even collapse. Her posture went limp, as if she were ready to pass out. "I'll answer anything else, just not this."

Hikari-san looked truly pitiable. It was like we were the devil trying to get her to do something wicked. *Give us your soul. Your most precious thing belongs to us now.* What an awful bunch of nonsense.

"No, it's okay, we don't mind," I said, breaking into the conversation. "Right, Tomo?"

"Yup. No use trying to force it out of ya." For all her selfishness, Kunagisa was being uncharacteristically sensitive. "Sorry, Hikari-chan."

"No, I'm sorry. You were just asking a question."

Hikari-san stood up. "Sorry I bothered you." She started to leave, but then paused and looked back. "Oh, by the way." She sounded like Detective Columbo or something, except much cuter so it wasn't creepy. She was even smiling. "This has nothing to do with my mistress. I'm asking you personally… do you really believe Himena-san has special powers?"

Did we believe?

Maki-san's ESP?

The ability to know all.

After thinking for a moment, I answered. "Right now, there's no particular reason not to."

"I don't really care if she has 'em or not," Kunagisa chimed in.

"Oh, yeah, you're probably right." Hikari-san gave a convinced nod, then left the room. My eyes stayed on the door for a while as I thought about her bizarre reaction to our question about Iria-san.

"Well, whatever."

It probably didn't have anything to do with this incident. It seemed highly unlikely that Iria-san's exile here had any influence on Kanami-san's death. Just then Kunagisa's workstation emitted a strange *boyoyon boyoyonnn* noise. I looked over at it to see Kunagisa had once again started doing something on it.

"What's up?"

"Mail, I got some mail. From Chii-kun. He's a fast one. People used to always say he ignores the theory of relativity like it was a traffic light."

She had just asked him to run a check this afternoon, so he sure wasn't slow—not to mention the fact that he was incarcerated.

"Wow, Himena-san's real name is Himena Shinari. Wow. That's a much better name. I wonder why she uses a fake one."

"Her real name? Hey, this guy even tracked down trivial stuff like that?"

"Yep. He was supposed to see how everyone was connected, but, man, he sure has a lousy personality. Seriously, he doesn't understand how to communicate with people at all. Oh, wait. Here it is. Hey, Ii-chan, we've got a connection."

I went over to her, but everything on the screen was in English, so I didn't understand it.

"Why don't you understand English, Ii-chan? Where were you studying all that time? The South Pole? Mars?"

"I forgot it, that's all. If you don't use something, it only stays with you for three or four months, y'know? Besides, my reading and writing were always worse than my conversation."

"Didn't the ER program entrance exam require English, Russian, and Chinese? How'd you get in? Backdoor?"

"It's like I'm tellin' you, I used to know it."

"Sounds like a lie to me. Anyway, I'll translate. It says 'Ibuki Kanami and Sonoyama Akane were spotted having lunch in a Chicago café.' About half a year ago. It's an eyewitness account. Hmm… 'lunch together.' I wonder why. Don't those two hate each other?"

"They had lunch together?"

As suspected, they had a connection. But why were they doing something like that? Akane-san had lived in the States, and Kanami-san was a world-traveling artist, so it wasn't that implausible that they could've met over there, but they sure weren't the sort of pair to be having lunch dates together.

"Yup, and it wasn't just a lunch date, either. It was at a super-secret club."

"Secret club?"

Speaking of sounding like a lie.

"Yup," Kunagisa nodded. "That's right. Those places really do exist. Even in Japan there are some, though not many. All sorts of politicians and celebrities and their families go there. Maybe 'high-class clubs' would be a more accurate description. The security at those places is out of this world."

Which raised the question of how this guy got the information, but I sure wasn't about to ask. Sometimes it's better not to touch the other end of the tunnel.

"Is that definite?"

"Chii-kun doesn't lie. But sometimes he doesn't tell the truth, either. I guess that makes him like you."

"Eh… I lie plenty."

I'll just let that say what it says.

So Sonoyama Akane and Ibuki Kanami had a connection. Whether or not it was important information, it was certainly something to be concerned about. I decided it was probably best to confirm it with Akane-san tomorrow. It never occurred to me that this would turn out to be impossible.

"There's some other stuff here about how everyone's doing recently. Natchan's doing about the same, huh? Ah, Satchan seems to be having some rough times. Hii-chan's gone missing. That is so him. The Admiral found a job… wow, a nice job. Atchan, too. Everyone else is doing well. Chii-kun, too. That's a relief. Have to admit, I was feeling a little guilty."

Feeling a little left out as she immersed herself in memories of the good ol' days, I rolled over on the sofa. "Let's get to sleep already," I said. Since Akane-san was in the storeroom now, I was stuck sleeping here.

"Okeydokey." She finished checking her mail, switched off the workstation, and dove off the revolving chair into bed. Then she rose to her knees. "Ii-chan, let's sleep together tonight for sure."

"Pass."

"It's so cold at night. If you sleep over there you'll catch a cold. This bed is a king-size. Lotsa room."

"Pass."

"Come on, I won't do anything! We'd just be sleeping together, that's all. I won't even touch you. You can even

sleep with your back to me. Come on, that's not so bad, right?"

"Pass."

"Please? I'm lonely over here."

Damn this girl.

She was really digging in this time.

I got up from the couch and looked her right in the eye.

"You swear you won't do anything?"

"Yes."

"You swore. I'm gonna believe you."

"No sweat," she nodded. "I won't let you down."

And so that night I slept on a real bed for the first time in a long time. A very long time. Not that I was expecting anything, but she really did keep her promise, and I could hear her sleep-breathing behind me. But since I had my back to her, I didn't know if she was really sleeping.

I remembered.

The old days.

Way back then.

Years ago.

Wow, was it really so long ago?

"Ii-chan."

She always used to call my name like that, with that sense of familiarity in her voice.

Her heart was just as open to me now, like we had never been apart.

Wide open, no façades.

I really don't like meeting up with people from the past.

Whether they've changed or not, it's a lonely experience for me.

Nevertheless, Kunagisa's house was the first place I went when I came back to Japan, before even going to my own home, and I did so without hesitation.

The blue-haired femme.

She still looked exactly the same.

Like those years had never happened.

I closed my eyes.

Surely this was the first time we'd slept side by side in a long while.

Just take her, Akane-san said.

If you want to be her one-and-only.

If you want not to be loved, but chosen.

"Nonsense…"

What if…

If I told Akane-san I had already tried that before, would she have held it against me?

It hadn't been out of love, but out of desire for destruction.

But Akane-san.

It didn't mean anything.

Really.

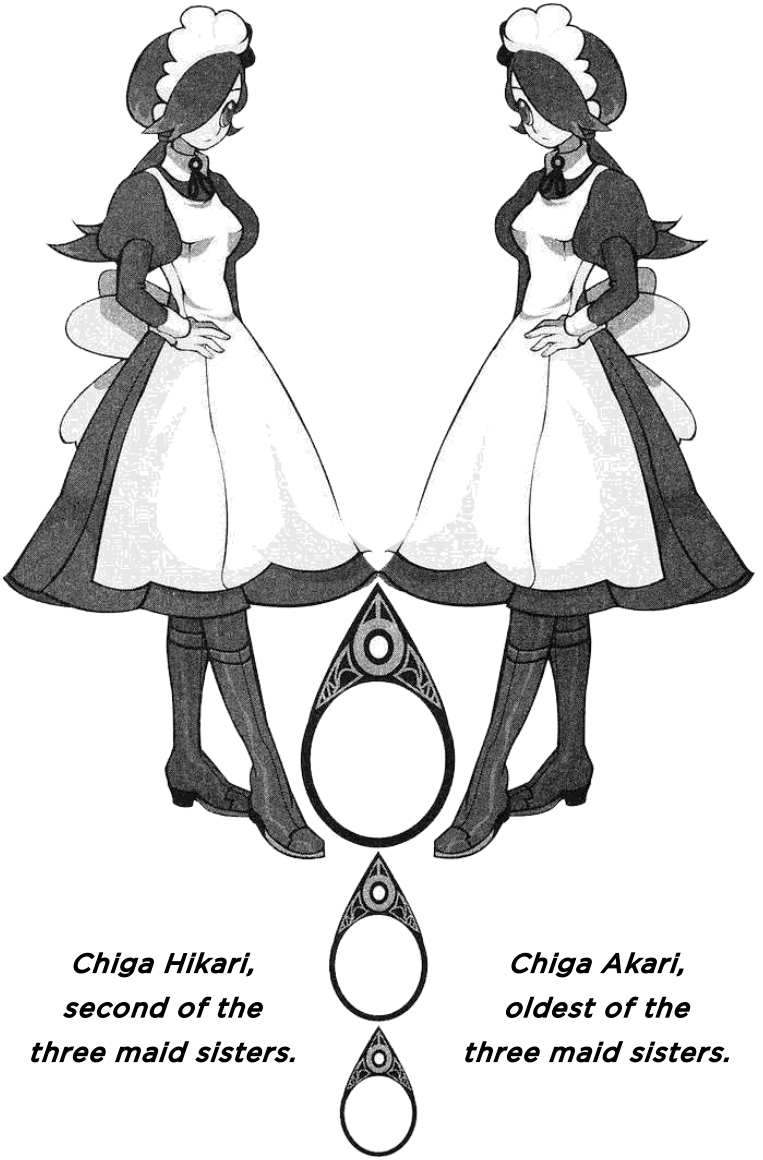
Really, it meant nothing.

So then what?

Then what should I do?

Please tell me.

THE FIFTH DAY



Chiga Hikari,
second of the
three maid sisters.

Chiga Akari,
oldest of the
three maid sisters.

1

THE SECOND DECAPITATION

Death to wolves, and death to pigs, too.

1

I awoke to a loud knocking. My head still swirling with sleep, I got up and opened the door only to have Hikari-san charge into the room and grab me by the collar.

"You bastard!" she suddenly screamed.

No, this wasn't Hikari-san, I realized. The day Hikari-san says something like "You bastard!" is the day I change my name to Samantha. To say something like that and grab me by the collar was, for Hikari-san, literally impossible. She lacked that ability. This was most likely not Teruko-san either… so it must be… Akari-san?

"Because of you, this—goddammit! You shithead!"

Even for Akari-san, this was pretty uncharacteristic behavior. In a complete frenzy, she looked as if she was going to start pummeling me any second. Or actually, she had already beaten on my chest several times at this point. I was just too surprised by her behavior to notice the pain.

"I'm so tired of this happening." She was panting and trembling. "No more of this… It's just too awful…. It's too awful. Why? *Why?!*"

"Take it easy, Akari-san." I grabbed her shoulders and gave her a firm shaking.

"Did something… happen?"

She shot me a glare. It was a look of true resentment. Vengeful indignation from the core of her being.

She glared with all her might.

Hadn't Hikari-san said something yesterday along the lines of "We've been trained to maintain our composure"? It wasn't likely that Hikari-san had undergone training that Akari-san hadn't. Yet here she was, out of her mind. What the hell had happened?

At last, she shook her head gently. "I'm so sorry. Please excuse me, my behavior was very inappropriate." She hung her head in shame. "It's not even your fault. This terrible thing isn't your fault…"

"Hey, don't worry about it… But what exactly happened?" I repeated my question. "Whatever it was, please tell me."

Instead of answering directly, she spun around with her back to me. "Please come with me to the first-floor storage room," she said, and began walking.

I stood frozen. "W-what? But that's…"

Akari-san and Teruko-san had supposedly spent the night on the mainland; when had they gotten back? According to the watch Kunagisa had fixed for me, it was already ten o'clock in the morning (although it was hard to read, since the numbers were backward). It was unlike me to have overslept. How embarrassing.

But now was no time for such thoughts. When Akari-san had returned and how long I overslept were far too trivial matters at this point.

More important…

More important…

"Akari-san, what did you just say?"

The first-floor storage room?

I had a bad feeling about this. Who was down there?

A real bad feeling.

What was happening on this island?

A *really* bad feeling.

And the feeling was probably right. There was a pattern developing here.

"Hey, wake up. Tomo."

"Hnnh? Gmorning… Put my hair up?"

Kunagisa sleepily raised her head. She wore a strangely content expression, like she had been having a nice dream.

"It seems like now's not the time for that."

She rubbed her eyes. "That means I don't have to wash my face, either."

2

An inward-opening door.

On the other side, Akane-san laid facedown, her body pointing toward us. As a result, the cross section of the cut—as well as all the flesh and bone and veins it revealed—was in plain sight. It was a grotesque reminder that in the end, human beings are nothing more than giant wads of organic matter.

Yes.

It was yet another decapitated body.

Just like Kanami-san's body, the head had been completely severed from the very base of the neck.

It was dressed in a suit. An expensive-looking, gray one. Ruined by bloodstains. But even supposing it hadn't been, just as was the case with Kanami-san's dress the day before, there was no one left to wear it.

The room was stark and barren. I had spent three days in here. Akane-san hadn't lasted one night.

It was an empty room. The only things inside it were a wooden chair by the wall, a house telephone hanging on the wall, a futon, a few books Akane-san had presumably brought with her, and the lamp stand.

"The door was locked, right?" Iria-san asked. "Right, Hikari?"

"Yes." Hikari-san's voice trembled. I looked over to see that her body was also trembling. "It was definitely locked. No mistake."

"Well, what about the window then?"

I looked up at the sound of Iria's voice. At the very top of the wall opposite the door, where we all stood, there was a rectangular window. But it was strictly for letting in sunlight and ventilation. As far as allowing someone to sneak in or get out, it was way too…

It was open.

It had an open/close lever that could be operated from within the room. If you thought about it, it was just big enough to let a single person pass through, if the person put in a little effort.

But still…

"It's too high," I said to no one in particular.

Breaking in through that window would be like taking a two-story dive, and breaking out would've been even worse. The impossibility of getting in or out through that window

was the reason we chose this room as Akane-san's cell in the first place.

In other words, the window was impenetrable.

However.

The only other port of entry or exit had been locked.

This was a dead end. Another sealed room. A second decapitation. Two decapitations, two sealed rooms.

Kunagisa, who was standing next to me, let out a whine. I tried to say something, but ultimately stayed silent.

Lying on the floor before us was the headless body of the woman we had all suspected was the killer. In a situation like this, what words were suitable?

The head was nowhere to be found.

This meant that just like Kanami-san, accidental death and suicide were out of the question.

"Anyway, it looks like we've got some things to reconsider," Iria-san finally said. "Can we all gather in the dining room? Hikari, lock this room."

Once again, Iria-san was the first to leave. Rei-san silently followed close behind.

"Some things to reconsider?" I repeated painfully. Indeed, that was right. All of our thinking and every speculation we had made up to this point would have to he wiped clean. It also seemed as if we had a lot of new details to consider.

"I guess this makes it a serial killing, huh?"

It was really painful to say that.

A serial killing.

I had locked Akane-san in here to prevent that very thing. And she had become the second victim as a result.

Yeah, real safe situation we had created. What the hell did I think would happen? What did I expect from a person who

kills others and *cuts their heads off*? Probably the good sense and strategic thinking of, you know, a *human* being.

I had felt so relaxed. Totally at ease. Completely proud of myself. I had stopped the killer from moving around. I was so confident. Carried away. Big-headed.

Akane-san's words from the previous night all came rushing back. The words she had left me with.

Could this be forgiven?

"It's all nonsense, really."

I turned on my heels and left the crime scene.

At that moment, I spotted Yayoi-san out of the corner of my eye. She looked terribly pale. Even more so than yesterday. I guess you'd expect as much from anyone who'd seen two headless corpses in two days. It wasn't like looking at pork or chicken.

Still, there was something—just then Yayoi-san seemed to notice my gaze and sped off to the dining room, as if to get away from me.

I wondered what that was about while Kunagisa tugged on my arm.

"Ii-chan, let's go already. Iria-chan'll get tired of waiting around. Everyone's already gone; there's no point sticking around."

I nodded.

Things to rethink, and new things to think about.

As such, the morning of the fifth day was total crap.

3

"It was around two in the morning," Hikari-san said.

Dining room.

Round table.

But we were two fewer people than just two days ago.

The artist extraordinaire Ibuki Kanami and member of the Seven Fools Sonoyama Akane.

The bickering duo was no more. They were no longer alive.

"I received a phone call in my room… from Sonoyama-san. She said she had forgotten a book in her room that she wanted me to bring her."

"And then?" Iria -san said. "I presume you did as you were told?"

"Yes," Hikari-san nodded. "It was a kind of old-looking paperback of *Bakaichi* by Mushanokoji."

"That's not really important. So at that time, Akane-san was still alive, yes? And she had a head?"

"Yes, at that time she was alive," Hikari-san said distinctly.

This meant that Akane-san had been killed after two a.m. I had assumed I was the last person to see Akane-san alive, so I was a little surprised. But really, I don't suppose I had "seen" her, per se, since we had only spoken through the door.

Her body had apparently been discovered around nine o'clock that morning. She usually woke up and went for breakfast at a set time every day, so Hikari-san was concerned when no call came from Akane-san's room, and thus became the one to discover the body.

At first she had suspected that Akane-san had merely overslept on account of being in a new environment. But reality had something else in store. At any rate, assuming

Hikari-san's testimony was true, the time of the murder was limited to a seven-and-a-half-hour window. The body didn't appear freshly killed at the time it was discovered, so it seemed that the murder probably occurred in the middle of the night.

"Well then," Iria-san said, looking over the people at the table. "Let's start looking at alibis like we did yesterday."

She sounded like she was playing some kind of game. I won't claim to be able to judge what was inside Iria-san's heart, but at the very least, she seemed to have no sense of sadness or grief.

No matter who it had all happened to or what happened, it didn't happen to her. That's all there was to it.

"This time, I don't have an alibi." I decided to get the ball rolling since nobody was talking. "Hikari-san came to visit our room around ten or eleven last night. I think. But then Kunagisa and I went to bed and fell asleep."

"You went to bed together?" Iria-san teased.

"Yeah, right. 'Went to bed' is just a figure of speech. I slept on the sofa."

"But if you both went to sleep, there's no way of confirming that one of you didn't slip out in the middle of the night."

"Oh, oh, but you can rule me out. Kunagisa slid her hand horizontally across her neck. "The storage room is on the first floor, right? I can't go downstairs alone."

"Eh?" Not only Iria-san, but everyone gawked at Kunagisa in surprise. Well, everyone except for Maki-san, who wore an utterly indifferent expression, as if to say, "I already knew that." But you can always count on her to be the exception.

"That's why I always make Ii-chan come with me."

Yup. I hadn't come to this island just because I was bored or interested. I had a bona fide reason for being here, and Kunagisa needed me.

Kunagisa had a wide array of unique quirks and characteristics that made everyday life a serious health risk, but among those were three major ones, and within those three was one of special note: she couldn't handle extreme vertical locomotion on her own.

That was a rule.

I suppose it's more fitting to call it a rigid, compulsive, subconscious rule that lay somewhere within her mind than a "quirk." If poorly enforced, it would be revealed, and she would scream and shout and you wouldn't be able to lay a finger on her. It was the same way years ago. I wondered if she might have been cured, but it seemed it wasn't such a simple condition.

"Is that right?" The look of surprise remained on Iria-san's face. "But this is the first time I've heard about this."

"Well, it's not really something you bring up all the time. But if you've been observing me, you'll note that I haven't gone up or down any stairs alone the whole time I've been on this island."

I was always with her during meals, or else she was locked up in her room.

Kunagisa Tomo.

"Now that you mention it, you do always get that guy to come to your room and get you. But we don't have any way to prove this."

"We do have a medical certificate," I said. "It's a mental disorder, so to speak. So I think we can confirm Kunagisa's alibi for now."

Not mine, though.

Iria-san seemed to be pondering this for a moment, but then she switched her train of thought. "Well, what about Himena-san?"

"I was in my room drinking all night." She looked over at Shinya-san. "Together with that wonderful gentleman over there."

"Is that right, Sakaki-san?"

"Well, I don't know about the gentleman part, but otherwise, yes." He gave Maki-san a little wink. "I only meant to go bother her for a little bit, but I ended up staying all night drinking."

That makes two nights in a row that they were up drinking. They must have had incredible endurance. Or maybe that wasn't the case for Shinya-san. Maybe he just couldn't bear being sober after the loss of Kanami-san.

I could imagine how important she was to him. He had taught her painting, and even raised her to surpass him. She was special. Her existence had been important to him.

"Neither of us were particularly intoxicated, so I think we can vouch for each other," Shinya-san said. "Yeah, it was around one in the morning. I couldn't get to sleep… you know, because of what happened, so I went to the living room and there she was. Then she invited me to her room, and we ended up staying there until morning."

Yup. *That's* what he meant. But either way, he was in her room for a fact; so the two of them had solid alibis.

"I was sleeping the whole time," Yayoi-san said before even being asked, as if we were going in some sort of order. "I've got no alibi at all. But I think Hikari-san can at least vouch

that I got up at six a.m. and that she helped me prepare breakfast."

For some reason, she was sort of mumbling her words, and she looked up to see Iria-san's reaction. There was something off about her, and something about her bizarre disposition was bothering me. It's hard to explain, but something caught my attention. I just didn't know what it was.

"Hmm," Iria-san said. "How about you, Hikari?"

"Well, I delivered the book to Sonoyama-san at two a.m., then I went to bed. So I don't have an alibi until the time I woke up this morning."

"I see… Oh, I suppose I have to give my story as well. I was in my room talking with Rei all night. We were discussing what to do from here on and what to tell Aikawa-san. Isn't that right, Rei?"

Rei silently nodded.

"I had already slept that afternoon, so I couldn't get to sleep at night. By the time we finished talking, it was already morning, so I figured it was too late to try and sleep, so then… the usual things, and then finally breakfast. I think that's a solid alibi, isn't it?"

For some reason, Iria-san looked at me when she said it. It was a challenging gaze. I shrugged. "Yup, sure is. So when did Teruko-san and Akari-san get back?"

"At about nine o'clock." It was Akari-san, who had only a short while ago jumped me in Kunagisa's room. She had completely returned to normal by this point, but she didn't try to make eye contact with me.

"Nine o'clock?"

Speaking of which, she had said something kind of strange earlier. "I'm so tired of this happening," or something to that

effect. But what was she so "tired" of? No matter how you looked at it, there was something strange about her whole manner at that time.

Something told me she wasn't just referring to Kanami-san's death.

"Well, I guess that means Akari and Teruko have an alibi, yes? Which means…" Iria-san said. "The people with alibis are Sakaki-san and Himena-san, followed by me and Rei, and Teruko and Akari. And most likely Kunagisa as well. That's seven."

On the other side we had myself, Sashirono Yayoi, and Chiga Hikari. The three of us had no alibis. But while the question of who had an alibi was an important one, there was one thing more important in this case.

"Um, Hikari-san?"

"Yes?" She looked in my direction.

"Maybe I'm being too trivial here, but could you tell me whether or not the window was open when you delivered the book to the storage room at two o'clock?"

She looked off into space as she thought about it for a moment. "I believe it was closed," she answered.

"I see. Is it something a person could easily open?"

"Yes. It's supposed to be for ventilation, so if you just use the lever—you have to crank it like this—it opens and closes normally. But that's only from the inside. It's completely sealed off from the outside."

"I see."

This was a troublesome development. A *very* troublesome development. A window more than ten feet high. Without a ladder, it was virtually impossible for someone to climb out, and even more implausible that someone had climbed in.

In other words, we had another "locked room" mystery.

"Well, tell me then, how do you go about handling the key? Are there copies of it or anything?"

"I have the only key. There are no copies or master keys."

She seemed pretty worried. Which was only natural. The implications of this conversation were that she was the only one who could've possibly committed the murder. Just looking at it objectively, that was the most likely case.

But I wasn't about to point that out. I didn't want to cause another Akane-san-style mishap.

"What type of lock is it?"

"Just a normal one. You twist the key like this and the bolt latches. I don't know the official name…"

"And you definitely locked the door at two a.m.?"

"Yes, I locked it. For sure. I even checked several times," she answered with a somewhat pained expression. "For sure."

"I see…"

She was an honest girl.

To the point that it must have made life difficult for her.

Seeing her like this, it seemed clear to me that she wasn't the killer. If she were the killer, she wouldn't have gone to all the trouble to report that she had been called to Akane-san's room in the middle of the night. Anyone could have deduced that much.

Of course, you couldn't throw out the possibility that she had strategized all this to fool everyone. That kind of argument could go on forever.

I continued my questioning.

"And nobody else was in her room when you went there? What about the possibility that someone was hiding in the dark or something like that?"

"Well, I didn't sense anybody else in the room, but"—she tilted her head as if she didn't quite get the point of my question—"I can't be certain. I didn't actually go into the room. I gave her the book at the door."

"Weren't you scared?" Yayoi-san suddenly asked, her voice faint. She wore an upset expression as she continued. "I mean, didn't we all think Sonoyama-san might be the killer? And you met with her alone, in the middle of the night? Weren't you scared?"

"No, not at all," Hikari-san answered after a moment's hesitation. "I didn't think Sonoyama-san was the killer."

"Why not?" For some reason, Yayoi-san was being strangely pushy with Hikari-san. "What makes you so sure?"

"Uh, well…" Hikari-san looked over at me with a worried expression. Ah, it was because of her conversation with Kunagisa yesterday. Indeed, after hearing that conversation there was no reason to suspect Akane-san in particular.

I thought about things as I watched this conversation unfold between the two ladies. But I couldn't pin anything down. It had seemed to me that if something had happened, it probably happened around two a.m., when Hikari-san delivered the book, but then, after listening to her testimony, that didn't seem to be the case.

So what to do now?

How to continue?

"I don't suppose the room was completely sealed. The window was open, after all," Iria-san said to me. "In that sense it's not exactly what you would define as 'sealed.' "

"But it's impossible to get in or out through that window."

"There's a chair in the room, right? Couldn't you reach the window if you stood on the chair?"

"I don't think so. Even if you stretched and jumped at the same time, I don't think you'd reach it. Shinya-san is the tallest person here, and I don't think even he could reach it."

"Is that so? So Ibuki-san's room was sealed off by a river of paint, and this time it's a room sealed off by a height problem…" Iria-san stretched out her arms with an irritated sigh. "And both women were decapitated."

Yeah, there was that issue as well.

The killer had cut off Kanami-san, and Akane-san's heads.

That was still a mystery. There was no reason to suspect switched bodies, but what other reason was there to cut off the heads? Could we just write it off as a bizarre fluke?

What's more, the fact that the killer took the severed head didn't make much sense. Of course, there was also the possibility that the killer severed the head specifically for the sake of taking it somewhere, but what in the world do you do with a severed human head?

And that question just led to another question: why were these women killed in the first place? I had no idea. This case was full of things I didn't understand. It was all hopeless and meaningless.

Dammit.

Since when had I become so dumb?

"Hmm… looking at things objectively, Hikari is the most suspicious one here." Iria-san said suddenly.

Hikari-san flinched for a moment. "Eh? Oh, um, I…"

"Hikari was the one with the key, and one of the three people with no alibi. If the window isn't a possible entrance or exit, the door is the only possibility, right? There are three people without alibis, but only one of those three has a key."

"Please hold on a second," I barged into Iria-san's monologue. "That's no good. That's not a fair assumption."

"Assumption? I believe the correct term is 'reasoning.' "

Hikari-san watched our interaction with a worried expression. She didn't know what to say.

"It's like Akane-san said yesterday. It's foolish to reach a conclusion based on the process of elimination and selective thinking. I won't go as far as to call it foolish, but I do think we're leaving things out."

"I wonder. Is that right? I don't think so, personally."

"It was that thinking that caused me to have Akane-san locked up as the prime suspect. And this is the result. This is the result of that, Iria-san. There's nothing I can say about what's already over and done, but I refuse to make the same mistake again. You understand, right? It's too dangerous for anyone to be left alone anymore."

"Now you tell me," she said with a smile. Under different circumstances, it might have even been pretty. "Wasn't it your idea to have Akane-san locked up—sorry, *secluded*—in the first place?"

"That's correct. I'm not here to debate that fact. It was I who suggested we lock her up in there, and so now it is my duty to counter that suggestion. If I have to take responsibility for what happened, making sure it doesn't happen again is how I'll take that responsibility. At this point, it's still too early to determine who the killer is. We're still not even thinking about the things we need to be thinking about."

Maki-san let out a big yawn. Possibly because she hadn't slept in two days, or possibly because she was bored by the conversation. Most likely it was for both of those things.

She was just a bystander.

"Well, I still think Hikari is the most suspicious."

There was absolutely no sense of compassion in her words for this maid with whom she had coexisted under the same roof for all these years.

She was completely devoid of sentimentality. She spoke with the icy-cold tone of someone simply reporting facts as facts, with no emotion inserted whatsoever.

I thought I knew.

The answer to Kunagisa's question from yesterday. The reason this woman had been exiled from the Akagami family.

Akagami Iria. This world was all the same to her, by and large. It all had the same lack of value. And so she was searching for something of value; unable to find it, she was able to rid her life of anything without any shred of hesitation.

I had been wondering what she had done.

I had assumed she had done something.

But in reality, maybe that was the wrong assumption. Maybe it wasn't that she had done anything wrong, but that she couldn't exist as part of the Akagami family. Furthermore, maybe it wasn't the family that had shunned her, but in fact the other way around. It wasn't out of the question.

And here I thought it was supposed to be her job to stick up for Hikari-san.

"Well, let's do this then," I suggested without looking up at Iria-san. "We can say for a fact that it's no longer sate for anyone to be alone. So let's divide into teams. No complaints about that, right, Iria-san? I don't think I need to bother explaining the purpose of making teams, right? It's just safer than moving around alone. And that way we can all watch one another's backs. Now, since I've been sticking up for Hikari-

san, I'll be on her team. Her, Kunagisa, and I will be Team A. How's that sound?"

"Hmm, interesting." Iria-san seemed genuinely impressed. "You're smarter than you look, huh? Teams, eh? Well, naturally I'll be teamed up with Rei and Akari and Teruko. Then let's have Maki-san, Shinya-san, and Yayoi-san on Team C. Shinya-san and Maki-san have been confirmed as innocent twice in a row now, so Yayoi-san can put herself at ease. And even if Yayoi-san is the killer, it would be two against one. Does that sound okay?"

"What if we just had everyone stay in the dining room together? Until Aikawa-san gets here?" Hikari-san said, looking over at me with the same worried expression. "That way nobody has to be alone and the killer can't take any actions, either."

"We can't do that. You mean just stay put here? Don't be ridiculous."

I spoke not only to Hikari-san, but to the entire group.

"Kunagisa and I have some moving around to do."

4

For the time being, we decided to bury Akane-san's body. As was the case with Kanami-san's body the day before, simply leaving it there on the floor was out of the question. Iria-san didn't seem to have any plans to call the police anyway, so we went ahead and did as we felt.

We decided it would be best to use the digital camera to first take pictures of the scene of the crime as we had done the day before, then go bury the body in the mountain woods behind the mansion, so the three of us headed back to

Kunagisa's room. But our plans would end up being slightly modified.

"Gah!"

The instant Kunagisa entered the room, she let out a scream that reverberated out into the hall.

I took a peek in and discovered the reason.

"This is… *wow*…"

"Ah, what the hell?" Kunagisa was uncharacteristically vocal. "This is bullshit!"

Destroyed.

It was destroyed.

Inside her room lay destruction. All three of her computers, the two PCs and the workstation. They had been completely smashed to bits.

"Wahhh! Why did this happen?!" She frantically scrambled over to the completely exposed, mostly unrecognizable mess of mechanical parts. "Awfulawfulawfulawfulawfulawful! This is bullying! Demonic! There is a demon on this island! It's Diabolos, Ii-chan! A tragedy! Uwaaa! This is the ruptured organ compound fracture of computers! Even the monitors are busted! Why?! Ah, this keyboard was *impossible* to build! The holographic memory! Oh my God, the motherboard!!! What happened to—oh my God, it's been *smashed*! What the hell is this?!?!"

She had lost it. Like flipping a switch. For a happy-go-lucky girl like her, this was a fairly rare state of being. Or at least it was the first time I'd seen her like this since coming back to Japan.

"Why would they do something like this? Oh, it's too awful… Ii-chan Ii-chan Ii-chan… So whaddaya think?"

"It's ghastly." Even supposing these computers were a nuisance, there was no need to go this far. They were smashed up so bad, it seemed like overkill. "I wonder if they used some kind of iron bar. It's not a very clean method of destruction. Or maybe it was a hatchet or something."

"Why did this happen? Who did this? You think it was the killer?" Hikari-san said in a whisper.

The killer? Maybe the person who murdered Kanami-san and Akane-san was trying to create some chaos. But what was the point? What did the killer have to gain by destroying Kunagisa's equipment?

"Oooh… poor me. I want to cry," Kunagisa said, as if really about to cry. "Hah… well, whatever. I already sent a backup to my house and all. But still, I went to so much trouble to build these. I didn't see this coming. I guess next time I'll have to make the motherboard out of unbreakable parts."

"Wow, backup to the rescue, huh? At least you won't lose the software you made."

But in reality, it wasn't much of a "rescue." Kunagisa's computers weren't the normal equipment used by your average professional. They were all completely homemade, so the external parts were actually worth even more than the internal parts.

"Now we can't even view what was on the digital camera. It looks like the camera and the mobile memory are busted as well. Oh, it's too horrible. Does this person think money grows on trees?"

I thought for a moment. "Hey wait, you're one to talk."

I snapped my fingers. As expected, the camera seemed to have been destroyed very deliberately. Which made the culprit's motive entirely clear.

"I see, I see. It makes perfect sense," I muttered to myself. "Yeah, this is surprisingly easy to understand. They must have been afraid of us snooping around any further."

"What do you mean?" Hikari-san asked. "You know why this happened?"

"Yeah, I think so. You saw them yesterday, too, right? Kunagisa's pictures from the atelier had all been sent to the hard disk through a USB connection. Whether or not the culprit knew all that, they must've figured those images were incriminating."

The workstation and mobile memory had probably been destroyed with extra care.

Kanami-san's room.

Those images.

"I think that's why this happened."

We hadn't told anybody about the mail or info from Chii-kun, so the killer wouldn't have known about that, but everybody knew about the pictures. Kunagisa slumped her shoulders in realization of this fact.

"Ah. I didn't even bother applying extra protection. I never imagined anyone would resort to something like this."

"This room doesn't have a lock, does it?" Hikari-san said. "I guess you were unlucky."

I patted Kunagisa on the head.

"Keep your spirits up. I guess this means we can't just sit around happily waiting for this detective guy to show up." I put my hands on her shoulders and sort of half hugged her. "No more playing around, huh?"

We didn't know who the culprit was, and we didn't know the motive, either. But we did know one thing for sure: the

bastard had destroyed something precious to Kunagisa Tomo for his or her own selfish reasons.

This was unforgivable.

"Huh? Hey. Wait, wait a second," Hikari-san said as if having suddenly thought of something. "Who did this?"

"Uh, the killer, right? We don't know who that is right now."

"But we were all in the dining room, and then we came directly here, right? Who could've had the time to destroy everything like this?"

Whoa.

We had been in this room until Akari-san came. Then we went to the storage room where the murder had happened, but we were the last ones there. Everyone else was already gathered. Then everyone went directly to the dining room as a group.

If that was the case—or rather, that *was* the case. Logically, there was nobody here who could have committed this destruction.

"This is obviously the work of a human being, but nobody had the time to do it. What the hell?"

It didn't make sense. Yet another mystery to worry about. Just like Kanami-san's sealed room and Akane-san's headless body.

No.

This was different. This was a different sort of mystery. It went beyond simply trying to figure out people's alibis and motives. It wasn't a matter of tricks or gimmicks. It was simply an impossibility.

Which meant…

"Which means maybe this is the key."

I looked at Kunagisa. I looked at Hikari-san.

And then I thought.

If this was the key…

Then where the hell was the door?

5

Determining that the equipment was beyond repair, we decided to continue with our planned course of action. And by that I mean Akane-san's burial.

We went to the storage room, placed her body on a big stretcher, and headed for the mountain woods behind the mansion. The stretcher was kept in the mansion in case of an emergency, but I doubt they had had an emergency like this in mind.

No…

Maybe they had.

This time we would bury the body alone, without a sleeping bag. Hikari-san took the front of the stretcher and I took the back. Despite her small frame, Hikari-san's length of service as a maid was apparent in her surprising upper-body strength.

Kunagisa followed behind me carrying the shovel.

Carrying the back of the stretcher placed the corpse directly in my field of vision, front and center. Even being used to this sort of thing, it wasn't the most pleasurable experience in the world.

On the way, I remembered something I had meant to ask.

"Hikari-san, was Akane-san wearing the same clothes when you brought the book last night?"

"Yes, they were the same," she replied. "Of course, she still had a head, too."

It wasn't the type of joke you laugh at. It was far too true to be funny.

The digital camera had been destroyed beyond all repair, so naturally we couldn't make a record of the storage room where Akane-san was killed. This was probably exactly what the killer had hoped.

Surely the killer was mocking us. But he or she was taking Kunagisa's memory too lightly.

"Hmm. Hmmhmmhmm. II we assume the killer broke everything because he didn't want there to be a record of the scene where Kanami-chan was killed, why exactly was that? Did the pictures show some concrete evidence? I don't remember anything like that."

Inside her head was an image of not only yesterday's crime scene, but also of the storage room we had just visited, just as accurate and precise as that digital camera. They didn't call Kunagisa Tomo a prodigy for nothing.

"Anything sticking out in your mind?"

"Uh-huh. Tons of things are sticking out. I'm trying to narrow them down. Ermm, ah, right…" She began mumbling to herself. Once she had gone into this kind of state, it was best not to bother her. I looked back over at Hikari-san.

"So where should we bury her, Hikari-san?"

"I suppose away from Ibuki-san would be best."

I couldn't have agreed more.

Walking through the mountain forest for a while, we eventually found a spot we thought would make a decent burial ground, and decided to begin digging. Yesterday we had had twice as many men, so today promised to be relatively

exhausting. I had hoped Shinya-san would be able to help us, but alas, he was on a different team. That and, for the average guy, having to bury the corpses of two acquaintances in a period of two days was more than a little nerve-racking.

Unless you were a guy like me.

In which case it was nothing to write home about.

"This should do."

I brushed the hair out of my face. If this were summer, I would've been sweating like crazy. I hoisted myself out of the hole and lowered Akane-san's body into it. Then, a brief, silent prayer. I didn't know whether or not there was a point to such actions, but I figured it was better to do it than not.

Regardless of where or how I die, or who kills me for what reasons, you won't hear a complaint out of me.

The last words I had heard out of Akane-san. But did she really mean it? Even being killed like this, had she crossed over to the other side like a saint, without a single gripe?

For me, that was an impossible feat.

"I really wish we could bury her with the head, huh?" Hikari-san said. "Ibuki-san, too. Why do you suppose the killer cut the heads off anyway?"

"That's the question of the week, I guess. But we keep coming up with the same answer."

That is, "I don't know."

I scooped up some dirt with the shovel and began burying Akane-san's body. My joints would be hurting tomorrow for sure. If I still had the mental faculties to feel pain, that is.

There was no saying I wouldn't be the next murder victim. The chances weren't very high, but it wasn't impossible.

A serial killing.

Maybe it was already over with Kanami-san and Akane-san. According to the information from Kunagisa's old buddy

Chii-kun, the pair had had some sort of relationship in the past, although I couldn't say what kind, so there was always the possibility that the whole ordeal was already over. But maybe that was just overly optimistic thinking.

At long last, Akane-san's body was completely buried.

"Hikari-san, since we're already out here, would you mind taking me somewhere where we can see that storage room window from the outside?"

"Certainly."

She began walking.

Kunagisa followed behind, blue hair waving. Speaking of which, I hadn't put her hair up at all today. I decided to do so properly once we got back to her room.

As we were walking, Hikari-san turned to me with a serious expression. "Thank you so much." Not knowing what that was in regards to, I was taken aback.

"At breakfast, you stood up for me. So I wanted to thank you."

"Oh, well, I didn't just do it because it was you. I just hate the idea of making the same mistake again. Even putting mistakes aside, I just hate repetitive actions, really."

Maybe that was why my memory was so bad.

"Nyahaha, that is so you, Ii-chan," Kunagisa giggled childishly. "But really you did it for Hikari-chan, right? 'Cuz she's right in the center of your strike zone."

"What exactly is my strike zone?"

"She's older than you, she's a girl, she's petite, she's got long hair, she's slender, she doesn't wear any rings or anything, and she's even wearing an apron dress."

"I've never said anything about apron dresses."

"Also girls who wear jeans on the bottom and nothing on top, librarian-lookin' girls who dress in white uniforms and wear glasses, gothy girls who are taller than you and have brown hair and wear jerseys…"

"Don't make me sound like such a freak."

Damn. She sure was chatty.

But to be sure, Hikari-san was totally up my alley. In terms of speed, I preferred the slight harshness of Akari-san's personality, but certainly I had no problem with Hikari-san's gentle "slowball." I suppose Teruko-san was some sort of disappearing magic pitch…

I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

"Hah…" Hikari-san gave an ambiguous smile tinged with embarrassment. "Anyway, I wanted to thank you. My mistress can be quite… severe in these cases. Plus, unlike yesterday with Sonoyama-san, this time it seems like I *must* be the killer. Even I couldn't help but think so. At least with Sonoyama-san there was the pretense that it was a sealed room, so really *nobody* could have been the killer. But this time—"

"Don't worry about that anymore, Hikari-san." I was becoming a little irritated, so I cut her off mid-sentence. "You've already thanked me, and you've already shown your sincerity, so you don't have to keep thanking me for everything."

"But—"

"If the situation had been reversed, you wouldn't have just left me there on my own, right? I think you would have done the same for me."

"But I think if that happened, you would thank me."

Well I'll be damned. She was playing hardball.

"I think he means that you're a friend," Kunagisa said. "And we don't doubt our friends. That's why I don't think Ii-chan or you could be the killer."

"Friends?" she nodded, brimming with emotion. "I've never had friends before. I've been by my mistress's side for as long as I can remember."

"I don't have any friends, either. Neither does Ii-chan. So we'd be happy if you'd be our friend."

Kunagisa took Hikari-san's hand.

Just looking at a sight like this was enough to bring a smile to your face. But realistically speaking, it would've been hard for Kunagisa and Hikari-san to continue a friendship, I thought. From here on out, Iria-san would likely need Hikari-san at her side more than ever before, and meanwhile Kunagisa was scheduled to head back home. And once back, Kunagisa was bound to stay holed up in her home all the time.

Kunagisa Tomo was a lonesome girl.

They often say that geniuses are completely self-sufficient. If that was the case, Kunagisa fit the bill.

And most likely, unable to analyze the situation in any other way, it was I who was the loneliest.

"Oh. it's over there. The window."

I looked around in confusion for a minute. There wasn't a window in sight.

"Oh, is it that one? I said, pointing to the only window I could see, which stood at about the height of my chest.

"Yeah, that's it."

"But that height is—"

"It looks high up from the inside, but half this place is built on a mountain, so…"

While I listened to her, I looked into the room through the window. You could make out a small puddle of blood, the wooden chair, and the door. It was without a doubt the storage room where I had been sleeping and where Akane-san was killed.

Wow. So part of the mansion was buried in the mountain, including this room.

"In that case, breaking in wouldn't be so hard, huh?"

"But you can't open the window from the outside. And it doesn't lock with just a latch, either, so you couldn't get it to unlock by rattling it a little."

"Well, what about the possibility that Akane-san opened the window on her own, letting the killer in?" Kunagisa said. "Like maybe the killer knocked to get her to open it. Y'know, like 'anybody home?' "

"It's hard to believe Akane-san would do anything to let the killer inside. I mean, it's Akane-san. Plus, this really is quite a height. It feels all the more real when you're looking from the top down. I, for one, sure wouldn't want to jump down from the window."

The window was the kind that tilted open, and only partially, so it didn't look like there was much room to make a balanced jump, either. And it looked like if you didn't make a proper landing, you could easily break a bone, or even die if you happened to hit your head.

"But even supposing Akane-san had accidentally let the killer in, she could've easily called for help. The house phone was right by her."

"Maybe she was attacked in her sleep… Oh wait, I'm an idiot. If she was sleeping she couldn't open the window," Kunagisa said.

"And even ignoring that fact, how would the killer get back out? Even an expert rock climber couldn't get up a flat wall like that."

"Teehee! Like a gecko." Kunagisa poked her head inside the window and looked around. "Oooh, it is a dangerous drop, huh? What if the killer used rope?"

"Rope, huh? But there are no trees in this area to tie it around."

I looked around the area. Whether it had been deforested or it had always been this way, the whole place was nothing but a big grass plain, and there was nothing appropriate for tying a rope around.

"And y'know, rappelling isn't the easiest trick in the book, either. I have some experience with it, but it's pretty damn tough. The skin from your hands peels off and stuff."

"Not if you wear gloves."

"Well, yeah, but I still think it's pretty unlikely. They might as well have brought out a ladder and stuck it through the window. That's probably more likely anyway," I said.

"But a ladder wouldn't fit through a gap this small. It would get caught halfway, and then a person couldn't fit through."

"Hmm, I wonder. Hikari-san, is there a ladder anywhere on this island?"

"Well, no…"

"What about the possibility that someone brought one with them?"

"I don't think so. I would've noticed if someone brought something that big."

"How about a rope ladder? Then they could easily hide it in their luggage, and it wouldn't get caught in the window."

"Ii-chan, you even forget stuff you said yourself? If it was a rope ladder, there wouldn't be anything to tie it to. It would be possible if they stuck some kind of metal hook in the wall, but that would've left a hole. The wall looks fine as far as I can see."

That was true. This was just common sense, not the kind of thing even worth bringing up. But for the sake of confirmation, we were discussing it anyway. It was just another form of "preestablished harmony."

I faced Hikari-san.

"Have any ideas?" I asked. "Or even just any observations?"

"Hmm, nothing in particular…" she said as she approached the window. "But assuming the killer didn't enter through the door, the window was the only other way to break in, huh?"

"Break in… but maybe they didn't even have to break in." I was just coming up with this on the spot. "The chair is over there, which means that must have been where Akane-san was sitting and reading. Maybe the killer made some sort of lasso out of rope, put it in through the window, caught it around Akane-san's neck, and then pulled her up. So she was strangled to death. Then she was pulled up as far as the window, where her head was cut off. How about that?"

Implausible, huh? At the very least, it didn't have any holes. The killer wouldn't have had to sneak in through the window, or even enter the room, and still could have killed her.

There were no holes at—"Oh no, wait, that's no good."

"Why not? I didn't think it was so implausible," Hikari-san said, confused. "If that was the case, anyone could have done it."

"Human bodies aren't so light."

For a woman, Akane-san wasn't small. She was taller than average, and she looked like she must have weighed at least 110 pounds. She probably wasn't as much as 130, but she definitely wasn't in the 90s, either. To lift her from this height would've required not only a really tough rope, but some incredible arm strength to boot. I definitely couldn't have done it. To pull someone up this high with just two arms was a crazy feat of strength.

"Shinya-san's probably the strongest one here, but he's got an alibi. And even if he's the strongest one here, that's very relative. I don't think even he could lift a human body by himself. Not to mention that Akane-san would've been resisting all the while."

And while she was resisting, the house phone would have been right beside her. If she even just kicked it over, somebody would have discovered what was happening. It wouldn't have been a very wise method.

"Plus, in that case the window would have had to be open. But would she have really opened the window and then turned her back to it? She wasn't stupid; in fact, quite the opposite. So she was probably being somewhat cautious."

Indeed.

Dammit. And here I thought I was getting a little warm, but I was still on the wrong track. I felt an unpleasant sensation, like I was in some twisted dimension. It was like searching for the corner of a circle. Something was decidedly off. Something was depressingly messed up. What the hell was I doing wrong?

I felt as if I was being given the run around, big-time.

"Anyway, let's go back to the room. There's nothing more to see here."

Not that there was anything to see back at the room.

Seemingly reluctant to leave, Kunagisa stayed gazing in through the window for a while, but finally turned and began to follow me.

"Did you spot something?"

"Uh-uh, nothing special. More important, I'm hungry."

"Oh yeah?"

"Then let's go have lunch," Hikari-san said.

"Yeah," I nodded.

Chiga Teruko, youngest of the three maid sisters.

2

LIES

Don't you have anything better to do?

1

Hikari-san had been completely relieved of her duties by Iria-san. "Instead, go help Kunagisa-san and the other guy," she had been told. It was a soft way of saying, "No way in hell am I going to entrust any of the housework to the prime suspect," or at least that was partially what she meant.

And thus, the three of us remained together even after finishing lunch.

"Would you two go on ahead of me?" I said to the two girls on the way to Kunagisa's room. "I want to stop by Iria-san's room for a bit. Kunagisa, hold on to this."

I pulled a small knife out of my pocket and handed it to her.

"You've been walking around with something that dangerous?" Hikari-san said in surprise.

"A young man always carries a knife in his heart."

"And a young woman carries a pistol," Kunagisa joked as she took the knife. "Well, let's go, Hikari-chan."

"But…"

"It's okay, it's okay. Let's leave it to Ii-chan," Kunagisa said, half dragging Hikari-san along. As long as they were together,

Kunagisa wouldn't have any trouble going upstairs. That was one of the reasons we were on a team of three.

"Well, I guess we're going then."

I did an about-face and began walking toward Iria-san's room.

Time to request another "audience." I gave myself some mental prep. Then I took in a deep breath.

I knocked on the thick door, waited for an answer, and then entered. Inside the room, I found Iria-san and Rei-san, as well as Akari-san and Teruko-san, which I guess I probably should've expected since they were a team. All of them were sitting on the sofa, elegantly sipping black tea.

Akari-san awkwardly avoided eye contact with me, as if trying to escape. She must have been regretting going bananas on me that morning in Kunagisa's room. That was only natural, but it was I who was at a loss for what to do with her speaking so openly to me.

Iria-san's mouth slowly curled into a smile.

"Is something the matter, Mr. … um… what was it? You're the one who proposed that we operate in teams, and now you're here alone? That's a bit of a problem, now, isn't it? Hikari is on your team, you know—"

"Iria-san," I interrupted. "Um, you still don't plan on contacting the police, do you?"

"Not a chance."

A snappy answer.

An utterly cold, curt response.

She was just amazing.

You're really wonderful, Akagami Iria-san.

"I don't think that's a good thing, to be honest," I said.

"Would you also care for some black tea?" It was Rei-san. She stood up without waiting for my reply and walked over to the pot. Iria-san shot her a look that seemed to have some hidden meaning, but then looked back toward me.

"If the police came now, you'd be a sticky situation yourself, don't you think? Akane-san was killed because of your suggestion, after all."

"It doesn't matter if it would put me in a 'sticky situation' anymore. I live to be given the run around. More important, what about you, Iria-san? Akagami Iria-san. You might be killed, too, you know. What do you think of that situation?"

With Rei-san's invitation, I took a seat on the empty part of the couch next to Teruko-san. Teruko-san made no attempt to even look at me. Her vacant eyes stared off into space from behind her black glasses. It was like her focus was out of alignment or something. Or no, it wasn't out of alignment. It just wasn't in tune with mine.

The black tea was good.

Iria-san took a long pause before answering me, as if trying to intimidate me.

"What do I think of it? Of this situation? It's terrible. It's a terrible event. Of course that's not all I think, but what if I ask you the same question? What do you think?"

"It's a dangerous situation. I have no interest in sticking around with a murderer in our midst."

And I had no interest in sticking Kunagisa in such a situation, either. I didn't know how she felt about things though. I had no idea. But as for me…

"Hmph. Do you think murder is a terrible thing?"

"Yes I do," I answered promptly. "I do think that. Without question. No matter what reasons they might have, murderers are the most despicable type of human."

"Hmm. So what would you do if you were going to be killed? I mean, if it was kill or be killed, what would you do? Just sit there and wait to die?"

"I'd probably kill. I'm not a saint. But in that moment, I would consider myself the most despicable type of human. No matter what kind… what kind of person he or she was."

"You look like you're speaking from experience." Iria-san gave me an unsavory smile. It was a wicked smile, perfectly befitting a woman of such absolute power, with such an overwhelming upper hand.

I thought she reminded me of someone.

Ah yes, Kanami-san. It was that same sort of "Didn't you know that?" kind of smile. But why would a nongenius like Iria-san have a similar smile to Ibuki Kanami-san?

"You think murder must be punished? But imagine you set some food in front of a mouse, and every time the mouse tries to eat it, it gets an electric shock. What do you think the mouse does?"

"Mice are capable of learning, so it would probably stop trying to eat."

"Wrong. Mice are capable of learning, so it would eat the parts of the food that aren't electrified."

"Humans aren't mice."

"And mice aren't humans." She clapped both her hands together. "Gee, as long as we're discussing this, maybe you'll answer this for me. Why is it wrong to kill people?"

It was the kind of question you might ask a junior high school student.

She didn't seem to be joking.

"Because it's against the law, because it's easier to function in society if you believe that, because I don't want to be killed myself."

"All of the above lack persuasive power."

"I agree. So this is my answer: there is no reason. You need a reason *to* kill someone. Like maybe you were pissed off, or you just wanted to kill the person or whatever, but nobody kills without some reason. But it's not something you choose, right? To kill or not to kill? That's not something you choose. That's just drivel that people with a Hamlet complex spout. The instant you embrace such doubts, you cease to be human."

Am I who suffers noble?

What a joke.

"Killing is wrong," I said. "That's an absolute. You don't need a reason."

"Hmm, is that right?" She nodded with blatant insincerity. "I suppose I can understand where you're coming from. But if we knew who the killer was, this case would be closed. Once Aikawa gets here, we'll find out who that is."

"I don't know this Aikawa-san."

"But I do. Isn't that enough? Akari, tell him when Aikawa-san's coming."

"In three days," Akari-san answered, still without making eye contact with me. "We asked Aikawa-san to come earlier than planned. So…"

"There you have it. If we knew who the killer was, of course you could just leave. You're here on this island because you're a suspect. That's the only reason a talentless, mediocre boy such as yourself is here. Speaking of which, you didn't

have an alibi when Ibuki-san was killed *or* when Sonoyama-san was killed, did you?"

Thunk. I placed my still-more-than-half-full cup of tea back in its saucer, let out a deliberate sigh, and slowly rose to my feet.

"Please excuse me. I think we're speaking completely different languages here."

"Indeed," she sneered. "There's your exit."

"Teruko, see him back to his room," Rei-san said to Teruko-san sitting next to me. "So that he's not all alone. You shouldn't have a problem with that, right?"

With a quick nod, Teruko-san got up from the sofa. I didn't fully understand what Rei-san had meant by that nor how to react to it, but nevertheless Teruko advanced out of the room on her own. I scrambled after her, leaving Iria-san's room behind as well.

By the time I got out to the hallway, Teruko-san was already quite a ways ahead of me. What kind of an escort sped out the door ahead of the guest? As usual, I couldn't read her mind at all. And it wasn't just a matter of her doing things at her own pace. I accelerated to catch up with her.

But more important…

My conversation with Iria-san really hadn't gone anywhere at all. I had more or less expected that, but still I was surprised at how quickly it had died. It seemed Iria-san really trusted this Aikawa-san. But did such amazing detectives really exist in this world?

I hoped so.

I sincerely hoped so.

No, I was wishing for it.

Praying.

"Maybe that's all nonsense, too."

I let out another sigh. I would just have to try again. It didn't seem likely that I would be able to progress very far without the cooperation of the owner of this mansion. It was nothing to brag about, but I could be surprisingly determined. And I was a sore loser. The worst of the worst sore losers. There was no way I would give up that easily.

Huh?

Did somebody say something just now? I could have sworn I had heard someone's voice. I looked around the hall, but nobody was around besides Teruko-san and me. It must have been my imagination. My ears were playing tricks on me. Maybe I was losing it.

Hmm…

No.

It was the sound of a voice.

Which meant…

There was just one other, highly, *highly* unlikely possibility. I knew that it was nearly impossible, logically speaking, but could it have been? Was it possible?

"Teruko-san, did you say something?"

By any chance?

She stopped upon hearing my question.

"I said it would be better for you to just die."

I was speechless.

It was the first time she had ever spoken in front of me, and I never would have guessed it would be a line such as "it would be better for you to just die." That was just too much. Was she for real?

And then she turned to me and stared from behind those dark glasses, perfectly still.

It was an accusing gaze, and I couldn't help but wince. We stood like that for a while, her staring me down, but realizing I didn't have the perseverance to beat her, I decided to just ignore her and keep on walking. As I tried to pass, she grabbed me by the arm and tightly clenched it.

Squeeze.

It felt like an electric shock had run through my elbow.

Without releasing my arm, she pulled me into a nearby room and shut the door behind her. She forced me onto the sofa. From there she sat down so that we were face-to-face, and removed her black glasses.

"Those are just for show?"

"They're so we can be told apart."

She raised her face.

Her voice was exactly the same as Akari-san and Hikari-san's.

That clear, beautiful voice.

"Is that right?"

"No, I'm lying. I just don't want to look at your face."

"No, I'm lying. I just wanted to see you make *that* face."

"Can I help you with something?"

Unable to figure out her intentions, I knew that it would be bad to get swallowed up in this bizarre situation, so I tried my best to seize the initiative by asking questions. But she just sat there looking around the room without giving any response.

"I'll give you a word of advice," she suddenly said, continuing to ignore my question. It was as if she were talking to a ghost behind me. "You'd be best to live on your own. When you're around other people, you cause trouble for them."

The worst part was, without her glasses, she was completely indistinguishable from Akari-san and Hikari-san. Being told this kind of stuff by not only Maki-san but now her, too, was, to be honest, unpleasant.

I felt like I'd been betrayed.

"A person who does nothing but bother other people should just stop being a person altogether. If you can't do that, then you've got to go on living alone. That's what I think."

"Why are you saying this?"

"But I'm the same way."

A clear answer.

Her expression showed no change.

Not even a flicker.

"But you're here with other people and—"

"We've stopped being people."

We.

Exactly who did that include?

"This morning, Akari was rude to you. I apologize." She changed the subject without any segue. And her pale expression and her tone of voice remained unchanged.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"That was me."

"Huh?"

She continued, oblivious to my confusion.

"It wasn't really *me* per se, but it was my body. The three of us all share these three bodies. All three of us have three personalities each, and each of us has the same personalities and memories. So although the one screaming at you this morning was Akari, it was really my body."

"You're lying."

"Yes."

She kept a completely straight face. What was up with this girl? She kept throwing me crazy curveballs. I didn't know where she was going with this at all.

"Now then, enough with the chitchat."

And she thought this was just chitchat.

"Let me get to the point. I don't think it's very wise to be yakking on and on about the police around my mistress. She can be quite patient, but everyone has a breaking point."

"Why is Iria-san being so stubborn about it anyway? She says it's to keep the peace here, but I can't help but think there's more to it than that."

And hadn't the peace already been broken? She didn't seem to be interested in peace in the slightest.

"You really want to know?"

"I do."

Teruko-san stood up.

She came over beside me. She leaned up against me. She was stuck to me. Her body was all the way up on me.

"It's because… no criminal likes the police," she said, her voice completely devoid of tone or cadence. "That's why."

I was at a loss for words for a moment, not quite clear what she meant.

"Surely you've wondered why my mistress is on this island. Why do you think she's here?"

"Well, with that personality of hers—"

"She messed up."

She was being a little sparse on the details, so I had no idea where the conversation was headed. How could triplets raised in the exact same environment have such completely different personalities? It really was like multiple personality disorder.

"Huh? What do you mean by 'messed up'?"

"Kunagisa-san can't handle extreme vertical motion. That's why you're here, yes?"

"Yeah, that's right." I guess she wasn't much for flattery. "Is something wrong with that?"

"My mistress is the opposite of that," she said eloquently.

It was almost like she was reading it right out of a script.

And a fairly dry reading at that.

"That's why she's on this completely deserted island."

She immediately continued.

"Have you ever seen my mistress's left arm? If you saw the scars all over her wrist you would understand, too."

The scars… on her wrist?

As dry and monotone as her voice was, it was deadly serious as well.

"They called it the abuse syndrome. I'm sure even you've heard of it?"

Abuse syndrome. She must have meant DLLR syndrome. Indeed I had heard of it. A form of autism in which the person *can't exist* without harming him- or herself as well as others. To be more specific, it was at the high end of the autism spectrum. At any rate, it was an exceptionally bad, impossibly unsavory, extraordinarily atrocious type of mental disorder.

In my time at the program I had read some literature about it, but I had never actually witnessed a case of it in real life, though I knew someone who had. As he had put it, "a person capable of killing without bearing any sense of guilt is truly a scary thing."

Truly scary indeed.

Was she saying *that* was Iria-san?

But DLLR syndrome was such a rare condition that its very existence was the subject of great suspicion. It was a fairly

compulsive condition, so it was supposedly extremely rare. There hadn't been a single case of it in Japan, and even in the States there had only been a small, countable sample. But I guess that's the Law of Great Numbers at work again.

"Teruko-san, that's—"

"Just as we are triplets, my mistress also has a twin, Mistress Odette."

Iliad and Odyssey.

That explained that.

"Is that right? So what's her sister doing now?"

"She's dead."

"You mean it, right?"

"I mean it," she said. "And the one who killed Mistress Odette was none other than Mistress Iria. Do you understand? Do you understand what that means? Have you grasped the logic here? It means that you've just insulted my mistress with your filthy mouth. 'Murder is despicable, no matter what the reason,' huh?"

"I didn't really mean to—"

"Your intentions are irrelevant in this case. At any rate, I presume you understand why she won't call the police now? If you understand, please go back to your room. And please stop making waves."

Without another moment's hesitation, she got up from the couch. I could tell from her disposition that this conversation was over.

But oh, oh Teruko-san…

"Don't make waves"?

That was *my* line.

"Teruko-san!" I blurted spontaneously after her.

Contrary to my every expectation, she stopped in her tracks by the door.

"What?"

"Like…"

Like…

Liiiike…

"Like… say there was a kid who spent the first ten years of his life locked in the basement without communicating with a single person, including his own kin. Can you imagine what that kid would grow up to be like?"

She didn't answer.

Naturally I wasn't hoping for an actual answer.

I just thought I'd try asking.

This girl here. This quiet, sallow-faced girl, living her life in silence. To me, she was probably…

"You and I are totally different," she said in a fairly harsh tone.

It was like she could read my mind.

She spoke without even looking back.

"Don't you dare make me out to be related to you in some way. It's disgusting and it makes me nauseous and it's an incredible nuisance."

"Sorry to hear that."

"You have nothing to belong to in this whole world. Not just here, *the whole world*. If you'd like me to put it simply: you're a popped cork," she said.

"That's actually more than I wanted to hear, especially from you."

"It had to be me who said it, because nobody else will." She didn't look back. She continued all the same. "It seems you still think you don't understand why Himena-san picks on

you so much, but the reason is obvious. It's because she can see what's in your mind. Nobody likes filthy things."

"I'm saying you're filthy."

"No need to repeat that… I'm fully aware of it."

"Oh, you're aware of it? And yet you manage to go on living. Well, that's the spirit. That must take a lot of willpower. That's worthy of respect. Or could it be that you think there's someone out there who will *like* you even after you've revealed yourself to them? Do you actually believe someone out there will choose you? Then you really are a popped cork."

There was nothing to say. Her words echoed. They were too heavy for me. I was going to collapse. Fall to pieces.

"How dare you barge into other people's lives when you're harboring such a monster inside yourself? You're lower than an insect. You're shameless. The world isn't that forgiving. How grossly conceited you are. And *that's* why—"

She opened the door. Then, for a moment, she looked back at me.

It was…

The expression of a woman staring at the object of her truest heartfelt loathing. It was an ice-cold look.

"You should just die."

Ka-thunk.

The sound of inorganic matter.

The door closed.

The power drained from my body. It was like the feeling you have when your shackles are removed, but without the sense of liberation.

"Jesus."

What a circus. I felt as if I were going to be crushed. Completely pulverized.

"This is the nonsense to end all nonsense, seriously."

Left all alone, I sat and thought.

Now what was it? I tried to recall everything she had said. Unlike Akane-san's conversation the previous night, there was no theorizing this time. There was no reasoning, no explaining, just the naked truth thrust in my face.

"Oh man, that did me some damage for real." I shook my head.

Don't think about it. There are other things to be thinking about now. I got up from the sofa and left the room. Looking around the hallway, not even Teruko-san's shadow remained. She was pretty light on her feet. Maybe that was another way in which she resembled me.

Anyway, all that mattered now was the information Teruko-san had left me with. The scars on Iria-san's wrist. Her "background." The fact that she had killed her sister… and in so doing had been exiled to this island. Her abuse syndrome. Autism.

Thinking of that, surely it was clear why she wouldn't call the police.

"Wait a minute. Hold it."

A revelation. I had seen Iria-san changing clothes right before my eyes yesterday. The first time she had granted me an audience. But there was not a scratch on her wrist. Not that I was staring at just her limbs the whole time, but surely I would have noticed such an imposing scar if it had really been there.

"Wait wait wait…" I stopped in my tracks, scratching my head. "What the hell is this?"

Essentially Teruko-san was a big fat liar.

Just like me.

2

On the way back to Kunagisa's room, I ran into Team Maki-san, Shinya-san, and Yayoi-san. They were apparently on their way to eat. I was a little jealous; with Yayoi-san on their team, they could eat amazing food whenever they wanted. Not that I had any complaints about Hikari-san's cooking.

"Ahaha… *boy*. Ahahahahahahaha. Aaaaahahahahaha… ha."

At the very sight of me, Maki-san burst into laughter. I was beyond finding this rude anymore. It was no less expected than the changing of the seasons.

"What is it this time, Maki-san? You're always so bustling with energy."

"Ahaha. Young man, it looks like Teruko-san did a real number on you. Oh, my stars. That's what you get."

"How do you know?"

"You're still asking me that? Thanks for an amusing show, Mr. Spineless. You must never get bored. I'm jealous."

For sure, Maki-san must have led a boring life. She knew all that had happened, all that was happening, and all that would happen. It was like watching a nonstop stream of movies where you already know the ending. There was no doubt that that sucked the fun out of living.

"That's not exactly true," she teased. Was she drunk? She seemed oddly high. The inside of her head must've looked like *mentaiko*.

Gah, she glared at me.

"Say, should you really be alone at a time like this in a place like this?" Shinya-san still looked a little blue, but he seemed to have calmed down quite a bit, and he was no longer pale. Even though it can be cruel sometimes, in the

end, time really *is* kind to us all. "Kunagisa-chan and Hikari-san must be a little edgy on their own. They're just petite little things. And Hikari-san is the prime suspect right now, right? Your beloved Kunagisa-chan could be in danger."

He seemed to be half joking, but it was clear that he really was worried about me. I bowed to him in gratitude.

"Eehehehe. You'll have to excuse us now, Mr. Half-Baked. Don't think too hard," Maki-san teased, and then turned her back on me. Shinya-san shot her a look.

"If you're feeling responsible for Sonoyama-san's death, I don't think you should worry about it. You did everything that was in your power. You couldn't have done anything else. You did your best," he said to me.

"Thank you so much." I bowed and thanked him.

"Well, see you later." With that, he turned around as well.

Yayoi-san had given me a few odd looks that seemed to mean something, but with no more than a slight nod of her head, she went off with the other two and headed for the dining room.

"What was that about?"

There wasn't anything suspicious per se, but something was strange.

"Eh, I guess it's not really anything to worry about," I muttered to myself.

Upon returning to the room, I found Kunagisa nose-deep in busted-up computer parts while Hikari-san was doing some cleaning. Word had it that Hikari-san was a total neat-freak. Come to think of it, she did always seem to be cleaning. I supposed it was one form of workaholism. Was there not a single normal person on this island?

"Hey hey, Ii-chan. You're just in time."

"For what?"

"Putting my hair up."

Gotcha. I approached her from behind. I decided to give her a whole bunch of mini-braids, and began braiding together small portions of hair.

"Ahhhh," she sighed with pleasure.

"Tomo-san. Is it okay if I clean up that mess?"

"Don't call it a mess. I can still use some of these parts, so I'm retrieving them now. You gotta reuse stuff. Recycle, recycle, *for Mother Earth*! Recycling's important, y'know. Mm-hmm. But what should I do, huh? Maybe I can make a secret weapon to stop that killer."

She sure knew how to keep her chin up. Not that I wanted to be like her, but you had to admire her positive thinking. Even if it was just because she had never known negative emotions.

Sigh.

"Oh, right. Hikari-san, do you have a memo pad or something? And something to write with?"

"They're in that cabinet. Do you need them?"

"I want to write up an outline of the current situation."

We had made an alibi chart yesterday, but the data had been smashed to smithereens along with the computers.

Therefore I wanted to create a new chart that included updated information.

"I see," she said and headed to the cabinet.

"Oh, hey. Tomo, I forgot to tell you, remember that painting? I figured out what was strange about it."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, you were saying something about that, weren't you? So what was it?"

"The watch."

"Watch?"

"Yes, the watch. When I was modeling for the picture in Kanami-san's atelier, I hadn't been wearing a watch. It was broken and I gave it to you to repair. So there wasn't anything on my wrist.

"Nonetheless, on the canvas, there was a watch painted onto it."

Kunagisa looked puzzled for just a moment, then reverted back to her usual expression and delivered a stock question. "Mmm. Don't you think it's just an error? I can't imagine it's very important."

"Well, yeah, maybe, but…"

"Which?"

"How about a subject and predicate?"

"The watch display. Was it the blank one, or the one after I fixed it that displays backwards?"

"Oh, well, actually, I'm sort of faced inward like this, so I couldn't tell."

"Mmm," she nodded. After a moment's thought, she said, "Yeah, I think it's just an error. More important, I thought of a clue, maybe. Akane-chan's murder was like… her headless body was all, errr…"

"Errr?"

"Her hand was kinda…"

She tilted her head to the side and folded her arms.

"Well, not her hand, but her fingers. There was something unnatural, I mean *really* unnatural about them, I think… Aw, man, my memory capacity has hit its peak. It feels like there's a big mosaic in my head. Hey, Hikari-chan, did you notice anything weird about her fingers?"

"Hmm…"

Hikari-san, who had returned at some point, sat down on the carpet next to Kunagisa so that she was facing me.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's some paper and a pen."

"Thanks."

I took the supplies from her and, while recalling the chart we had made yesterday, whipped up a new alibi list for the Ibuki Kanami and Sonoyama Akane murders, including everyone on the island.

Ibuki Kanami

(murdered)

Sonoyama Akane

Before earthquake: X
After earthquake: X

(murdered)

Kunagisa Tomo

Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Hikari, Maki, Shinya)
After earthquake: X

O (can't go down stairs alone)

Sashirono Yayoi

Before earthquake: O (Iria, Rei)
After earthquake: X

X (sleeping)

Chiga Akari

Before earthquake: Δ (Teruko)
After earthquake: X

O (on the mainland)

Chiga Hikari
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Tomo, Maki, Shinya)
After earthquake: X

X

Chiga Teruko
Before earthquake: Δ (Akari)
After earthquake: X

O (on the mainland)

Sakaki Shinya
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Tomo, Maki, Hikari)
After earthquake: O (Maki)

O (Maki)

Handa Rei
Before earthquake: O (Iria, Yayoi)
After earthquake: Δ (Iria)

Δ (Iria)

Himena Maki
Before earthquake: O (Ii-chan, Tomo, Hikari, Shinya)
After earthquake: O (Shinya)

O (Shinya)

Akagami Iria
Before earthquake: O (Rei, Yayoi)
After earthquake: Δ (Rei)

Δ (Rei)

Phew. Or something like that. Staring at the chart, I let out a sigh.

"Alibis, huh? But y'know, this doesn't really mean all that much, does it? We've pretty much shelved the idea of it being a cooperative crime up until now, but if you consider that possibility, this chart doesn't mean squat. Especially looking at these two- and three-person alibi testimonies."

There was also the possibility that people other than the killer had lied just so they wouldn't be suspected, and if you considered that, this charted information was even harder to swallow.

Well aware of the futility of it all, I decided nonetheless to write up a similar summary outline of the murder incidents themselves.

FIRST INCIDENT

Victim:
Ibuki Kanami

Conditions:
Sealed room
River of paint (solved)

Time of incident:
Night, presumably after earthquake

Notes:
Decapitated body
Killer unknown

SECOND INCIDENT

Victim:
Sonoyama Akane

Conditions:
Sealed room
Open window in a high location (unsolved)

Time of incident:
Between 2:00 and 9:30 a.m.

Notes:
Decapitated body

"And… killer unknown."

I finished writing and put the pen down.

"You're forgetting about the third incident, Ii-chan," Kunagisa immediately objected. "The Poor Kunagisa-chan Incident."

"Oh, right. It pales in comparison, but that's a mystery, too, huh."

"Don't say that! To me this is a greater tragedy than having my head cut off! As long as they've gone this far, I wish they *would* cut my head off!"

"Okay, okay." I picked up the pen again.

THIRD INCIDENT

Victim:
Kunagisa Tomo('s computers)

Conditions:
Unsealed room
No lock, enterable by anyone

Time of incident:
Between 10:00 a.m. and the end of breakfast.
However, everybody in the mansion was together
at that time. A time-sealed room?

Notes:
Destructor's goal presumed to be the destruction of
image data taken from the scene of Ibuki Kanami's death.

"A time-sealed room, huh?"

The first incident involved a room sealed by a river of paint. The second, a room sealed by an unreachable window. A room sealed in terms of height. And the third incident was sealed in terms of time.

"The second, third, and fourth dimension, huh?"

"That sure makes it sound like a crime of enormous scope. Say, Hikari-san, this question pretty much completely undermines any pretense we've had up until now, but… is it possible there are other people on this island?"

"It is not," she stated confidently. "There's only one spot on the whole island where ships can dock, so I think I can say that for certain."

"I see."

But if that were really true, then it would have been absolutely impossible for this to have happened to Kunagisa's computers. With enough wit and wisdom, a person could feasibly get through a sealed plane or conquer height, but time was the one dominion impenetrable by man.

"So I wonder if there's some kind of trick to this as well. Like a remote control or something. Mmm, but this is obviously the work of a human being."

"Hikari-san, is it possible that one or two people maybe slipped away in the midst of all the contusion of discovering the body? I mean there *was* a headless dead body right before our eyes. Maybe someone took advantage of the situation and walked off while we were distracted."

"I… don't think so…"

Hikari-san was still unconvinced. Even I couldn't help but scratch my head at the idea, and I was the one who had

brought it up. In reality, we probably would've noticed if someone had disappeared from the room.

"First incident. Anybody could have done it—that is, if you consider the possibility of a cooperative crime. But we've at least figured out *how* they did it, and we know it wasn't really a 'sealed room' after all. Now, second incident. This time, we have no idea how they did it."

"But I, as an exception, could have done it," Hikari-san said.

I nodded. "And then the third incident. *Nobody* could have done it. Moreover, there was no possible way it could have happened."

The incident itself was rapidly growing more complicated. This didn't bode well for the *next* incident.

"Jesus, what the hell kind of a cycle is this?"

"Well, I don't think this was all planned out intentionally. Hmm, but it doesn't feel right to write it all off as a coincidence, either."

"Anyway, let's stop thinking about all this disheartening stuff," I said. "Alibis, sealed rooms. Tricks, gimmicks, setups, fakes. Whatever. Let's just agree that someone is using some unimaginable method to fool us all."

"Maybe it's a virtual machine."

"Yeah, that."

I guess.

They often say in old mystery novels that it's harder to make a puzzle than to solve one, but I don't think that's true. Creating a puzzle or trick or what have you is far easier. In creating a puzzle, you're free to display events from whatever angle you please, completely catering to your own

convenience. Solving the puzzle, on the other hand, can only be done from that one presented angle.

So for now we just had to place the issue aside.

"But don't you think we should at least consider alibis? That's pretty much all the information we have right now," Hikari-san said. "And if we start making emotionally charged arguments, everyone will become suspicious. I mean, didn't Sonoyama-san become the prime suspect after Ibuki-san was murdered because they hated each other so much? But look at what happened because of that."

"Yeaaah, but— It really would've made sense if Akane-san was the killer."

And now Akane-san was dead, too.

"What about the thought that Sonoyama-san killed Ibuki-san, and then someone killed her in revenge?"

"If that were the case, then I guess Shinya-san would be the most likely to have killed her. He was Kanami-san's caretaker and closest friend."

"But Shinya-chan had an alibi. Even if you set that aside, how would he have known Akane-chan killed her?"

"Maybe he didn't, maybe he just had a hunch. Mistaken revenge may not happen every day, but it's not unheard of. If you think about it, what's the deal with Shinya-san and Maki-san? They've got alibis two days in a row. In the middle of the night. Don't you think their having alibis is conversely kind of suspicious?"

"It is a little, huh? Maybe they're synchronizing stories in secret. But you know, Himena-san doesn't really seem the type."

Himena Maki. The indescribable fortune-teller with superhuman abilities. The absolute absolutist, able to gaze

upon the inner workings of men's minds and hear any and all things. Something about her resembled Kunagisa. It was weird.

"What's up with you, Ii-chan? Have you fallen for Maki-chan or something?"

"Geez, don't say that. But you know, a spaced-out woman like her can't be expected to have the best common sense."

Man, this really was all futile. I felt like we had already considered every possibility. It was like we were stranded. What else was there left to think about?

"It kind of seems like maybe Akane-san knew she was going to be killed."

"Huh?" Hikari-san leaned forward in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"It just seemed that way. Last night, I had a conversation with her through the door, and at the time, well, it was like she was at peace. She was quoting Ryokan and stuff. It was really out of character."

"Hmm, I wonder if she knew who the killer was," Kunagisa said.

Indeed, that was a possibility. She *was* Sonoyama Akane of the ER3 system's Seven Fools. Even without conducting an investigation, if she had a hunch about who the killer was, it was pretty much sure to be right.

"By the way, Hikari-san. I was just talking with Teruko-san—"

"*What?!*" She was even more shocked than before, as if I'd just made some ungodly remark. No, not shocked, exactly. It was more like she was thinking, "Why would you tell me such a blatant lie?!"

"Y-you mean… Teruko talked?"

"Yeah. I was pretty surprised, too, but the real problem was *what* she said."

I explained to Hikari-san and Kunagisa what Teruko-san had told me. Of course I cut out the latter half. I was never one to go around boasting about my own faults.

"So what does it mean, Hikari-san? How much of it was true?"

Hikari-san wore a completely perplexed expression as she muddled out a vague response. "Um," she muttered. "Um, well, um…"

"Akari-san was ranting about something strange this morning as well. 'I'm so tired of this' or something like that. What was she talking about?"

She was still stumbling over a response. At last, she looked up at me, seeming to have made up her mind. But still, her eyes darted back and forth as she deliberated for another moment. Finally, she opened her mouth.

"It's all true."

Huh.

Admittedly, that was not the answer I expected.

This time it was my turn to be speechless. It was *all* true? Huh? What did she just say?

"I'll talk because it's come to this, and because I choose to trust you. And because I owe you." Hikari-san fell silent once again, and then, looking more lost than ever, finally continued. "Yes, my mistress is technically a criminal. We serve her in full awareness of that."

"And that's why you won't call the police?"

"We just work for her. We don't do anything else. Ever since coming to this island, various things have happened.

That's how we eventually met Aikawa-san, who you've been hearing about."

Various things? What various things?

The incident on this island.

Come to think of it… Come to think of it, the other night…

"Hey, Tomo."

"Yeah, Ii-chan?"

"I seem to recall you saying something the other night along the lines of 'I'm interested in the incident that happened on this island,' but is this just another figment of my awesome memory?"

"Nope."

"Then you knew?"

"Yup," she nodded with a giggle. "It's pretty well-known info. Lots of people know, but nobody ever talks about it. Not a lot of people are looking to make enemies with the Akagami Foundation."

So, Kunagisa's hobbies hadn't changed since the good old days. Maybe the passing of five years wasn't enough to alter her nature.

"Actually, it was mixed in with the rest of Chii-kun's information, but I thought it might be better to keep it a secret from you, so…"

"Why?"

" 'Cuz I knew you'd make that face."

Aha.

Come on…

I was drained.

Pallidly, falteringly, painfully, Hikari-san continued.

"Once we started planning this 'salon,' my mistress was able to calm down a bit, but… I can understand Akari's feelings of frustration. But you know, this is our job."

A job, huh? If she really meant that, it was quite a statement. I was honestly impressed. I respected any person who lived solely to fulfill their role, regardless of what that role was. It was something I could never do.

So Hikari-san, too, was truly immersed in the deepest depths of her abyss.

"Huh, so that's the deal, huh?"

But what did that mean? If the killer knew all this and knew Iria-san couldn't call the police, then…

Then the remarkable boldness, audaciousness, and fearlessness of his or her actions all suddenly made sense.

"Okay, Hikari-san, well…"

Just as I was about to ask for the details of this famous island incident, there came a knock at the door.

It was Yayoi-san.

3

"I have to go to the bathroom." That's what Yayoi-san had told Maki-san and Shinya-san in the middle of lunch before breaking off from her team and coming here. It was a pretty typical and hackneyed lie, and Maki-san could read minds anyway, and even under-the-weather Shinya-san probably could've seen through it, but one look at Yayoi-san's sickly blue expression, and they probably wouldn't have called her a liar if she said a pack of devils were on their way to the island on turtleback.

She sat down on the sofa and said nothing.

She seemed strangely wary of Hikari-san's presence. Maybe she, too, thought Hikari-san was the killer. It wasn't such an unexpected assumption, to be honest.

"Can we assume you came here because you wanted to tell us something, Yayoi-san?" It didn't look like this was going anywhere on its own, so I went ahead and asked.

"Yes," she nodded weakly.

"Um, you two are doing some investigating, right?"

"Well, that's the plan. It's become a personal matter at this point, after all," I said, looking at the computer parts in the corner of the room. "What about it?"

"Well, if you're investigating, I suppose the facts need to be accurate, right?"

"Yeah, well, naturally."

"If you proceeded from here with inaccurate information, there could be a third incident, right?"

"Fourth."

"That's right, Yayoi-san." We ignored Kunagisa's protest. "That's the situation. Um, Yayoi-san, I don't really understand what it is you're trying to say. It looks like you came here to help us, but am I wrong? Did you come here because you don't like being on a team with Shinya-san and Maki-san?"

"No, that's not it," she mumbled. "It's just… I— I told a lie I can't take back."

"A lie?"

"Yes. That night… I really was with Iria-san talking. It was only up until the earthquake, but that much is an honest fact," she said. "But Handa-san… *Handa-san wasn't there*."

Hikari-san's face went stiff.

Rei-san—Handa Rei.

It was suddenly clear why Yayoi-san seemed so nervous around Hikari-san and why she had seemed so unnaturally detached since the other day, staying holed up in her room all the time.

The ice was melting.

The other morning during the alibi check, Iria-san had said herself that she, Yayoi-san, and Rei-san were together. Everyone else was questioned one by one, but when Yayoi-san's turn came, Iria-san spoke for her. I had thought this was simply because they had been together, but it seemed that wasn't why after all.

Iria-san…

Akagami Iria was covering for Handa Rei.

Yayoi-san slumped down with her shoulders drooped. It was like she had been relieved of a terrible burden or freed of a curse.

"Why?"

Why had she kept silent about such an important detail up until now? It was a question I was in no position to ask. This was Iria-san's island and Iria-san's mansion, and it was Iria-san who had invited Yayoi-san here, and she was, after all, *Akagami Iria*. If Iria-san said, "I was with Yayoi-san and Rei-san," who could argue? Who could just call her a liar?

Like anyone could say that.

"I didn't think it was a big deal at the time," Yayoi-san finally said. "I just figured she was looking out for her own. But thanks to that, Akane-san became the only person without an alibi, and she was locked away and… killed."

She was speaking like a burst dam. I sat and listened in silence. Kunagisa and Hikari-san did likewise.

"And then regarding last night, Iria-san said she was with Rei-san again. All night long. But who could believe that? She said they were discussing what to do from here on, but why would that take all night?"

"Well, it's possible."

"I don't think so. Just because someone lied the first time doesn't mean they lied the second time, but the chances are pretty high, right? And Hikari-san"—Yayoi-san glared over at Hikari-san—"Hikari-san is one of Iria-san's inner circle, too, but Iria-san didn't even try to cover for her, did she? Why is that? Why would she cover for Rei-san but not for Hikari-san? Isn't it because she knew there was no need to cover for Hikari-san? Isn't it, conversely, because she knew *who the killer was*?"

"Are you saying Rei-san is the killer?"

I was surprised by this. I didn't think the conversation was heading in this direction. But Yayoi-san seemed absolutely serious.

"Certainly her alibi is rather dubious now—that is, if we can believe what you're saying."

"It's the truth. Whether you believe me or not, it's the truth," she said. Hikari-san looked like she had something to say, but as if having realized something, she remained silent. She chewed on her lip with a painful expression.

"Let's just hold on a second here."

If Rei-san didn't have an alibi that night, how did that change things? Maybe not all that much, but the fact that Iria-san had lied was unarguably huge.

Rei-san wasn't in Iria-san's room that night. That meant they weren't together after the earthquake, either.

Which meant…

"Mmm. Hey, Yayoi-chan."

"What is it, Kunagisa-san?"

"Why do you think Rei-chan is the killer? She's the head maid. She's the confidante. She's a hotshot. She's even closer to Iria-chan than Hikari-chan and the others are. So maybe Iria-chan just covered for her out of friendship. And we really don't know if she was lying the second time, even if she was lying the first time. And if Rei-chan really was the murderer, then that means Iria-chan knew about it, right? Why would she cover for—"

"What if Iria-san *ordered* the murder?"

Gulp, someone swallowed audibly. For all I knew, it could have been me.

"I don't think that's the case. Kanami-chan and Akane-chan were both invited here as guests. What's the point in bringing people over and then killing them?"

"What if she invited them here *to* kill them?" Yayoi-san pressed on. "Iria-san invited people here. And then those people were killed. If you look at it that way, it's not so unthinkable."

Was Iria-san using Rei-san in a plot to kill those two, as well as possibly a third, fourth, and fifth? It seemed like a highly unrealistic notion, but there was no proof against it.

Yeah. And on that note, hadn't I just heard the proof *for* it from Teruko-san and Hikari-san?

Handa Rei.

The head maid.

As Hikari-san, Akari-san, and Teruko-san's boss, she was in the closest position to Iria-san herself. So how about it? Was that the answer? Was that what it all came down to?

Akagami Iria.

Named for that great ancient Greek classic epic, Homer's *Iliad*, the work that told of the great war with Troy over Helen. All of the characters in that epic thought they were being manipulated by the gods. Was that it? If that was the answer…

As I thought, Yayoi-san continued on.

"Do you know why I was called here?"

"Because you're a genius, right?"

She grimaced.

"Well, Ibuki-san was a painter—a magnificent artist. Sonoyama-san was a scholar—fine. Maki-san is a fortune-teller—whatever. Kunagisa-san's an engineer, yes? That's wonderful. But I'm a chef. Unless she's some kind of gourmet cuisine nut, why would she call such a person here? I don't think cooking is really that special."

I was silent. Hearing her say that, there was no possible response I could give.

"And do you know why Ibuki-san and Sonoyama-san had their heads cut off?"

"That's a sudden change in topic."

"No, it's not," Yayoi-san said with a stern expression and tone to match. "*You are what you eat*. It's an idea that exists in Chinese cuisine. If your liver is bad, you should eat liver. If your stomach is bad, eat stomachs. In other words, if part of you isn't working right, you should eat that same thing. I'm sure you've heard of this?"

"Hang on now, Yayoi-san. This is…"

This… This notion…

"Who called Ibuki-san and Sonoyama-san to this island? *Who?*" Yayoi-san screamed. Her voice reverberated throughout

the room. The sound lingered in my ears. But I was so confused at this point I didn't even care.

Hold on… hold on a minute, here. Did she mean what I thought she meant? Just wait a second. Hold the phone. I'm begging you, just give me a little time.

"I'll say it one more time. No, I'll say it as many times as it takes. Why would the killer cut off their heads? Why would the killer take the heads with her? Where did she take them? And who was it who invited those two women here? Who brought these renowned geniuses here? What was inside those heads the killer carried off?"

If jewels are stolen from a murder scene, it probably means the killer was after the jewels. If cash is missing, he must've been after cash. Such thinking was just plain common sense.

And in this case, it was the victims' heads that were missing.

Yayoi-san continued. "Why was I invited here? Why was I, not an artist or a scholar or a fortune-teller or an engineer but a mere *chef*, invited to this island? Why have I been given special treatment and allowed to stay here indefinitely?" Her voice sounded like it was being squeezed out.

It was a voice seeking rescue.

She had probably been brooding over this. From the moment she had given her false testimony. From before Sonoyama-san was killed, and indeed the half day following her death as well, Yayoi-san had probably been thinking about it nonstop.

Yayoi-san turned toward Hikari-san and began her hopeless screaming once again.

"What… *Just what are they going to make me do?*"

Gulp—someone swallowed again.

This time it was definitely me.

Was it possible? Such a notion… Wasn't the acceptance of such a notion itself unforgivable?

If that was really what was going on, why now? It wasn't like this whole "salon" thing had just started. If that was Iria-san's little game, she would've done this in the past.

No, the five geniuses on this island right now were all world-class, top specialists in their respective fields. Had Iria-san been waiting for this exact timing?

"That's impossible!" Hikari-san shrieked. It was like she had exploded after holding it in until now. "The idea that my mistress would do such an inhuman thing, such a cruel thing now…"

"Now"?

I'm so tired of this.

The past.

Various things. So tired. Now. Why now? I'm so tired of this. Please don't make waves. I'm so tired. Tired, so tired. Even though I'm so tired.

But Yayoi-san didn't relent.

"I've been keeping an eye on Handa-san since yesterday morning," she said. "You know how the longer you watch someone, the more you start to notice their similarities to you, or you start to feel their humanity? Their humanness? Some kind of closeness. You know? It's like 'Oh, this person is just like me.' I felt that way with Iria-san. She's human, just like me. She lied, but she's still a human being. But Handa-san… That woman frightens me. How could I not be afraid of a woman like that whose whole life is an act?"

"That's—" Hikari-san interrupted with her head hung. "That's… that's… that's…"

But it seemed there was no end to that sentence. Even so, Hikari-san tried desperately to defend her mistress. In accordance with her duties. It was too heartbreaking—to the point that it was laughable.

"I see. Yayoi-san, I basically understand what you're trying to say. You're trying to say this, right?"

I tried my best to force my way into their conversation, but it was hopeless. Yayoi-san continued her relentless questioning.

"Akari-san and Teruko-san were on the mainland calling on a detective? Who can prove that? Who's the one who won't contact the police? Who's the one who won't let us leave this island? Maybe you were left out of the plans, Hikari-san, but where's the proof of that? They called you the prime suspect, didn't they? Where's the proof saying you aren't just a scapegoat here to shake things up? No, maybe you're in cahoots with Iria-san, here to make trouble for Kunagisa-san and—"

"Please stop this. Yayoi-san, that's enough," I said quietly. "Please stop insulting our friend. Kunagisa and I both dislike getting angry. But we're not afraid to do what we must."

My gaze was probably fairly cold, and she shivered for a moment at the sight of it. She had the same look of uneasiness that she had when she entered the room.

"I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm just scared."

"Yes, I understand that."

"This is a deserted island. There's nowhere to run. If this is all what I think it is, maybe I won't be killed. You weren't invited here as a genius, so you might not be killed, either. But your dear friend Kunagisa-san is in danger. Not even God can guarantee that she won't be the next one to have her

shoulders flattened, if you know what I mean. The time for leisurely investigations has already… I mean, I think we need to do something fast. I didn't come here to hiss at Hikari-san. I came here because Kunagisa-san is an engineer. Can you operate a boat, by any chance? If so, let's get out of here on that cruiser and—"

"Hold on." I held up my right hand. She looked up at me with a confused expression. Hikari-san eyed me curiously as well. Only Kunagisa remained staring off into space, a somewhat irritated expression on her face. I was probably making the same face.

Um, where was I? Why did I interrupt Yayoi-san?

Oh, right.

"Please say that again."

"Huh?"

"That thing you said. Say it again."

Yayoi-san tilted her head at me a bit.

"If so, let's get out of here on that cruiser—"

"Not that."

"Can you operate a boat, by any chance?"

"No, not that, either."

"Uh, I didn't come here to… yada yada yada?"

"No. Not that. Something grabbed me, but that wasn't it. Before that."

"I don't remember."

"Well remember. What did you say before that?"

"We need to do something fast… The time for leisurely investigations has—"

"*No.* We already understand that. We need to do something fast? That's practically a catchphrase. I don't care about the

stuff we already know. I think it was a little before you said that."

"That's all I got. That's as far as I can recall."

"Tomo!" I looked over at Kunagisa. "You remember, right?"

"Yup," she nodded.

She slashed her hand across the front of her neck.

"I'm gonna get my shoulders flattened."

"Bingo."

Yes. That. It had grabbed me. Was that because it suggested something I'd rather not imagine? Nope. It wasn't nearly something that trite. It was something totally, completely different.

Now this, *this* was the key. The Rosetta Stone.

"Um…"

"Silence please. I'm thinking. I think I'm on the right track. Definitely. It's simpler than the geography of Kyoto or Sapporo. We have a hypothesis and conclusion now, so all that's left to do is prove it."

I thought.

Kunagisa thought, too.

All the ingredients were probably there. I could sense it. Or we already had all the ingredients a while ago. They were all lined up in front of my face, to the point that it wouldn't have been strange if I had realized the truth as soon as Kunagisa's computers were smashed. The smashed computers weren't the key after all, they were another ingredient.

And now I had the key. This time, I had it.

And just as any door will open once you've obtained the key, so, too, would I soon arrive at a solution. It was like a zero-sum game. Like a simple maze with a watertight winning

strategy. Kunagisa probably had it, too. The mountain of sand was almost complete.

"Now this really is nonsense."

And after a while…

"*Is this it?*" I muttered.

But this was…

"*No way… this can't be right.*"

This couldn't be right. Like this could possibly be it. What logic was this?

But there were no contradictions, it was all consistent, it all made sense—it was complete. There was no other possibility left. It didn't look like there was any more sand to pile up, either.

Something felt uneasy. Something was strange. No matter how many mental checks I did, I couldn't feel satisfied about it, like the final question on an exam. I definitely wasn't wrong, but something felt off nonetheless. It was that kind of feeling. I couldn't shake it.

What was it… this vague, sickly feeling?

"What do you think, Tomo?"

"Mmm," she moaned.

"There's no 'what do you think' about it. There's only one possible train of thought. So that's why the fingers seemed strange, huh? But this means…"

It seemed Kunagisa had the same sense of anxiety. Yayoi-san and Hikari-san stared at the two of us like we were from Mars. Venus, maybe. I guess that's a trivial matter either way.

"I guess that's the only possibility, huh?" Kunagisa was first to fall before the reality of the situation. "I can't think of anything else. It must be the only possibility."

"Yeah. If there's only one possibility, it's got to be the right one, no matter how unbelievable it seems."

It looked as if we had to rely on selective thinking in the end. If Akane-san heard about it she surely would have gotten angry, but we no longer had to worry about that. At least insofar as this was in fact a case of serial murder committed by a person, there was only this one possibility. One possibility with one hundred percent odds.

Okay.

Time to just accept it.

I didn't like it at all, but this was reality, this was the truth. And those were just my nonsense-ridden sentiments anyway.

"Looks like we've reached an agreement, Ii-chan," Kunagisa said. "So what now?"

"What now, indeed. Hmm, this place is a little too big." I continued my pondering. I was more cut out for something like this than Kunagisa was. I may not have been any good at actual shogi, but if this, too, was a sort of shogi problem, I had it down.

"Now then, Yayoi-san, Hikari-san, could I ask for a little bit of your cooperation?"

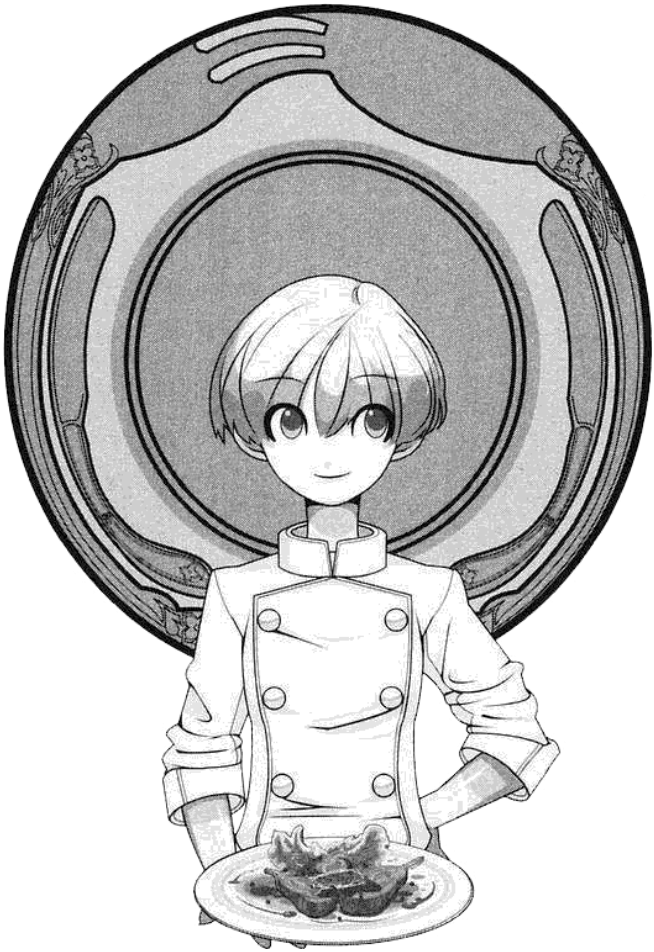
"Huh?" The lovely duo let out a collective question mark.

I rose to my feet. "The top of the inning is finally over. We're down by a lot of points, but it's not a called game yet. This is where we get that third out and launch our attack in the bottom of the inning."

"Yayoi-chan on first. Hikari-chan in center field. Yours truly as catcher and Ii-chan as pitcher."

Boing, Kunagisa jumped up off the bed and flashed a smile bright as the blue sky.

"Launching counterattack."



Sashirono Yayoi,

genius chef.

3

A CROW'S WET FEATHERS

End it.

1

By the way.

In Russian, "the crow's wet feathers" supposedly means "the peak of despair." Given that, you could romantically describe this island as the ultimate destination for those in despair. Just as the opposite of affection isn't hatred, but indifference, the opposite of hope isn't despair. Surely the opposite of despair is apathetic acceptance of all things. That sheer apathy laced with the absolute conviction that allows you to approve of all things, saying, "Yeah, that's fine"—*that* is the opposite of hope.

Everything is here, so what more could I possibly need? This apathy I felt was way over the line of normality. The proverbial destination of all of one's emotions.

That noninterfering realm on the other side of the lake that we all view at some point or another with admiring eyes laced with envy. That domain on the other side of taboo, connected to reality by a big equals sign.

To reach said domain, you had to make many sacrifices. What's more, it was a one-way ticket with no guarantees.

However, even then, there are people who reach it—whether by some mistake, or through knowledge.

Ibuki Kanami, Sonoyama Akane, Sashirono Yayoi, Himena Maki, Akagami Iria, Chiga Akari, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko, Handa Rei.

And Kunagisa Tomo…

This is all probably a big old heap of ridiculous mumbo-jumbo. Nothing but boring, worthless nonsense. And the continuation of this nonsense is unwholesome at best.

Really now, what kind of a clown was I?

• • •

"Have you figured something out?"

The fifth dinner assembly.

Teruko-san had her personal chores to attend to, so her seat was empty, but the other nine of us were all gathered together. Nine people. Until the day before yesterday, just two days ago, there were twelve of us surrounding this round table.

"Do I have to ask again? Kunagisa-san, you all are still doing some investigating, correct? Well, have you figured anything out?" Iria-san asked.

She seemed to be having an awful lot of fun. I'm sure she was. Of course it was fun.

Because she had probably created a whole world in her head. Because this island, this Wet Crow's Feather Island, was, in itself, her whole world.

"Shall I ask again?"

"We know absolutely, positively nothing at all," I answered. "So what about it? Is there a problem?"

"Oh, no. I was just thinking, I guess there's nothing we can do without a specialist after all," Iria-san said with apparent interest. "Well, I guess the best thing then is to continue operating in teams like this for the next three days."

"Three days?" Shinya-san said. "I must say, you seem to be expecting quite a bit from this person. Just what kind of person is this Aikawa-san, anyway? How did you meet?"

"That's a private matter," Iria-san smirked. "But I will tell you what kind of person. Hmm, what should I say? Aikawa-san is a very frightening person. Well, that's what you'd expect from the world's most powerful contractor. But also incredibly intelligent. I'm sure this case will be solved in no time. Hehehe, I really can't wait."

The detective, huh?

Solving the case before the lead detective even got here probably disqualified me as a supporting character, I thought. But my life was on the line here, too, and there were various complicated circumstances. I couldn't just sit around and wait for the main character to show up. It was his own fault for being late.

"Kekekeke," Maki-san snickered next to me.

She seemed to be having an awful lot of fun as well. I didn't know whether she was reading my thoughts or watching the whole farce. Surely it was at least one of those, but that probably wasn't the only reason she was laughing. Really, just who was this woman who was able to continue laughing even after knowing everything in the entire world?

She was probably deserving of respect. Still, I avoided eye contact.

"I'm told Aikawa-san will be here by the afternoon three days from now at the latest. After that, I'm sure everything will soon be—"

As Iria-san expounded over this detective of hers, she was interrupted by the sound of overturning flatware and pots banging together, accompanied by a screech.

"Enough!"

It was Yayoi-san.

Rising from her seat, Yayoi-san used her right arm to shove off the table all of the food she herself had made. She then proceeded to take the now dirty tablecloth and yank it, causing all the dishes to come toppling off the table and shatter. A string of ear-shattering noise echoed through the dining room.

"Enough of this!"

She banged her hands on the table.

"Sashirono-san…"

In an effort to settle her down, Hikari-san rose from her seat as well and approached her, but Yayoi-san gave her a violent shove.

"What is all this? Give me a break! I want out of this farce! Detectives? Sealed rooms? Decapitated corpses? This isn't some mystery novel. Don't you realize people are being killed? Why the hell are you eating during this kind of discussion? Their heads were cut off! Don't eat my food while you're talking about such a thing! You must all be crazy if you're able to stay so calm about all this! Why don't you care that people were killed? You're all disgusting! Since when was it okay to kill people in this country?"

"Sashirono-san…" Hikari-san said from the floor. "Please calm down."

"*You're* the killer!" Yayoi-san screamed even louder. "It's obvious! We already know that! You were the only one with a key to that storage room, and you visited Sonoyama-san's room in the middle of the night, didn't you? That's when you killed her! And you must have killed Ibuki-san, too!"

"You don't have any proof. You shouldn't say such things without any proof, Yayoi-san." I tried my best to stay cool as I reprimanded her. "There's no proof that Hikari-san is the murderer."

"Proof? I don't give a hoot about proof!"

"But there's no reason Hikari-san would have done such a thing."

"It's not like you can expect to understand how a maniac's mind works! She's probably going to use it in some kind of ritual! To call upon God! No more, no more, no more!!! Why are you trying to come near me? You think you'll take my head next? Never!"

"Yayoi-san, please calm down."

"I'm plenty calm! I'm fine! You are all the crazy ones! You're all nuts! You're all disgusting! Get yourselves together! I can't stand you! I can't even talk to you! What language are you all speaking? Detectives? Sealed rooms? Severed heads? What the hell language is that? Am I the only one from Earth here? If that's the case then I'll just leave right now. I don't want to be on this maniac island anymore. I don't want to talk to you people!"

Bam! She slammed the table once again.

"I don't trust any of you! From now on, I'm staying in my room. I'm barricading myself in. Call me when you're ready to send me back to the mainland! Otherwise, leave me the hell alone! Don't come near me!"

With that said. Yayoi-san stormed off toward the dining room exit.

"Sashirono-san," Hikari-san called once more, but Yayoi-san didn't even look back, and eventually she was gone from sight.

A brief, awkward silence.

"Oh my," Iria-san eventually said with slumped shoulders. "And here I thought she was so polite. What a temper."

She continued. "Oh, what now?" She sighed. "Aikawa-san is going to all the trouble to come here, I can't just send one of the suspects home. Hikari, this is your responsibility; go do something to convince her."

"Yes, ma'am," Hikari-san said with her head down. "Understood, my mistress."

"Ohhh, dinner is all ruined. Akari, will you hurry and make us something? Now just where has Teruko gone at a time like this?"

Indeed, dinner was ruined just as Iria-san said, but it was a necessary sacrifice. It wasn't my money, and of course you shouldn't waste food, but I wasn't the one who had done it anyway. It was Yayoi-san, the one who had made the food in the first place.

Kunagisa stared at the fallen, smashed dishes with a look of despair. Not the food, but the dishes. Perhaps she was thinking of her destroyed computers, which were the same shade of white.

"Hey, catcher."

"Mmm?" Kunagisa looked at me. "What, Ii-chan?"

"I better get going. I'll leave this to you."

"Gotcha," she nodded.

I rose from my seat and headed for the door.

I could hear the sound of trouble brewing behind me. I turned to find Kunagisa had climbed over the table and jumped Shinya-san. It was admittedly a slightly enviable sight for me, but for now, I had to let it go.

Besides, I couldn't take Kunagisa with me.

Running down the hall with one eye closed, I climbed the stairs and eventually spotted Yayoi-san by her room. She was leaning up against the wall, a vacant look on her face.

She looked up at me. "Ah," she sighed with relief. "How was I?"

"You gave a star performance."

"Performance, huh? It was more than half true, really," she said as she continued walking with me. "But is it really true? Is that person really the killer?"

"You checked it yourself right?"

"Yeah, the smell was right, but… I don't have that much faith in my sense of smell. I'm not a dog, after all."

"You're just like one though."

"That's not a compliment, you know."

Yeah, I knew. Kanami-san once told me something similar. It's not a compliment if you say, "You're like a such and such."

Well, what woman wouldn't be offended after being compared to a dog? I apologized innocently.

We had arrived at the door to Yayoi-san's room.

"So, what do we do from here?"

"Yayoi-san, please go back to the dining room. It's dangerous here."

"Then why are you doing it?" she asked, simply out of suspicion. "I feel like there must be another way. This is just my speculation, but it feels like you deliberately picked the most dangerous possible option."

"In this world there are people who die from eating too much and people who die from starvation, and the former is overwhelmingly more common. But it seems you're the latter type."

"Don't overestimate me."

"That wasn't a compliment."

With that she gave me a nod and slowly headed back the way we had come.

"Dangerous, man…" I whispered to myself. Of course, I was well aware of this. I had complete understanding of the dangers I faced when I decided to do this, which I suppose really did make me the starving-to-death type.

Now *that's* nonsense.

After a brief mental preparation, I slowly, gently opened the door to Yayoi-san's room.

Dark inside. Unable to see much of anything, I took a step inside.

Swoosh.

The sound of sliced air.

I did a forward roll and slid into the room. Then I rose to one knee and opened the eye that had been closed. This way I could make out the inside of the room at least a little bit.

Someone closed the door behind me. I could see the face clearly, and in that moment learned that my hypothesis had been correct. My opponent wore a slight look of surprise, but only held it for a moment before brandishing a hatchet—a hatchet!—at me.

Silent.

My attacker didn't say a word.

With a deep breath, I rose to my feet. It had been quite some time since I had done any acrobatics. Not that I had

been bad at it, just that my skills had definitely dulled in the few months since coming back to Japan.

As if realizing the immediate need to settle this, my attacker moved first, shuffling toward me. With Kunagisa holding Shinya-san down, someone would eventually come and save me as long as I could buy some time. There was no need to go on the offensive. In fact, I wanted to get out of there, but my attacker was standing between me and the door, so that probably would've posed quite a challenge.

For now, I just had to focus on dodging attacks. This sort of passive thinking had me written all over it, but it was no good. In focusing my gaze entirely on my attacker's hatchet, I completely neglected to pay any attention to my feet.

My attacker faked with the hatchet, then came at me with a leg sweep. It made a glorious connection. Unable to even roll back to my feet, instead my back slammed into the carpet. My attacker proceeded to mount me and pin down my shoulders. It all happened in a single instant.

The match was essentially over. Maybe I should have spent those mornings running marathons instead of just going for walks. Or maybe I should have continued going to the dojo even when I got back to Japan.

"Ah… ahhh…"

Ah well, truth be told, it didn't really make much difference whether I was killed or not. At this point, Kunagisa had probably already explained everything to the others, and Yayoi-san had already returned to the dining room as well. Either way, there was no chance my attacker would escape. I had lost the match, but the tournament was ours.

So this was fine. Now then, the hatchet. Use the hatchet.

"Die."

My attacker's cold, familiar voice. I realized I had completely given up. What was this sensation? Why? Why was I even willing to give up my own life?

I didn't want to live?

It wasn't that I wanted to die, but I didn't want to live, either. Life was a big hassle, but I wasn't jumping at the idea of death specifically. Was there nothing important to me? Nothing I wanted? Nothing I wanted to protect? Is that why I was so ready to give up?

"No."

No.

It was because even if I died here, no one would be bothered. Kunagisa wouldn't be bothered.

Maki-san.

Did you know this was coming? If so, I suppose I'm grateful that you didn't let me know about it. I now knew the reason Maki-san, who knew all, had said nothing. You die exactly when you should, though I wasn't quite in that frame of mind yet.

Indeed. Just as Teruko-san said, I really should just die. Seriously.

Hey…

But the hatchet wasn't coming down. It was raised way up in the air, and then just stopped. Looking up in confusion, I saw not a taunting expression, but rather a twisted grimace as my attacker struggled and fought to bring the hatchet down.

"You don't close your eyes, do you?"

There was another person! It wasn't the voice of the person on top of me. I couldn't see from where I was, but this third person must have grabbed the hatchet while it was up in the air and refused to let go.

Who was it? Had Yayoi-san come to save me? Had Kunagisa followed me here? But neither of these seemed like feasible possibilities.

The third person wrenched the hatchet upward and in the same instant delivered a beautiful, truly glorious low kick to my attacker's now completely open side. Unable to take the blow, my attacker rolled off me and slammed into the nearby sofa. In another instant, though, the assailant was back on two feet and face-to-face with the third person.

In one fell swoop, I had become a mere spectator.

At this point, for some reason, the third person threw away the hatchet. And here there was such a golden opportunity to use it. Could this have been a gesture of sportsmanship? At a time like this?

Unlike when fighting me, this time my attacker attempted no reckless leaping. But there was a time limit here. If this didn't get settled fast, there was a chance Kunagisa would finish explaining everything and bring the others here.

But this third person didn't repeat my mistake. *Bam*, came the sound of feet hitting the floor as the third person sprang toward my attacker, covering as much as six feet in a single stride. In a Japanese *kenpo*-style motion, the third person used the momentum from the leap to deliver a straight punch. Instead of dodging back or to the side, my attacker instead contorted diagonally, both dodging the punch and closing in on the third person at the same time. My attacker then grabbed the third person by the throat, but the third person delivered another straight punch without even trying to avoid my attacker's clutch. My attacker, still in offensive mode, was unable to dodge. The punch connected straight with the heart.

"Huh…"

My attacker let out a groan but refused to release the third person's throat. Then, almost effortlessly, my attacker slid past the third person's side and delivered a back kick to the calf.

The third person stumbled.

It appeared my attacker intended to use this opportunity to slam the third person into the floor. Watching from the sidelines, even I thought this was the end. But it didn't end. The third person used my attacker's arm as a pivot axis and swung up while shifting in midair, causing them both to fall to the floor together with my attacker's arm in a lock. It was a judo offense-through-defense technique.

Another instant. The surprisingly dull, almost anticlimactic sound of breaking bone echoed through the dark room. The third person released the arm and stood up. My attacker followed suit and began to stand up, too, but before managing to get up all the way, took a merciless kick to the already seemingly broken arm. My attacker flew through the air and over the sofa. Then came the sound of the shattering glass table. And my attacker fell back on the sofa.

"Phewwww." The third person exhaled a deep breath with complete calm.

We had a winner.

I was utterly speechless.

At last, the third person faced me. And then, without so much as a smirk, said, "When you're about to die, I think you should close your eyes."

"Didn't you say guys like me *should* die?" I mumbled faintly.

"Oh, that." She tilted her head. "That was a lie."

Teruko-san said.

Slowly shaking my head, I held my hand out to her. I figured the chances were about fifty-fifty, but she grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet.

"What are you doing here?"

"No reason. It was just inevitable."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't worry about it. It's just nonsense."

Now that…

That was my line.

Sigh.

"Thank you."

After pulling me back to my feet, she let go of my hand and looked at me with those out-of-focus eyes.

"No need to thank me. More important…"

A brief pause.

"There's something that's been bothering me."

"What?"

This was a fairly heavy statement to make. What was she about to say? I couldn't even imagine.

Dark.

My eyes had completely adjusted to the darkness, but even still, I couldn't read Teruko-san's expression.

Just like my own heart.

Just like the hearts of others.

"Your question from this afternoon," she said, with that same old pale tone and cold gaze. "I know you were speaking metaphorically… were you talking about Kunagisa-san or yourself?"

The child locked in the basement.

Deprived of communication with anyone else for ten years.

"Ah…"

Once again, I reached out to touch Teruko-san's hand for no reason at all.

For an instant, our fingers touched. And then, in that moment of separation…

An eardrum-shattering sound. The feeling of a shock wave running through my entire body. Teruko-san's body slumped onto me. Like deadweight.

I held on to her as she rested her entire weight on me. But there was no time to stand there and savor the warm touch of her expectedly light body. My eyes were still glued to the sofa.

Or, to be more specific…

To the woman sitting there holding a handgun. Sitting there, totally aloof.

My eyes were glued to it. It was a black gun, a relatively popular model. I had even seen a few overseas. I sure didn't expect to see one in this country, though. She had a Glock?

Why she hadn't used the gun until now was obvious. No matter how big this mansion was, it wasn't big enough to stop the sound of a gunshot from reaching every corner of it. In other words, this was probably the final ace up her sleeve. It was an illegal move, the absolute forbidden method.

In which case…

In which case the day was mine. I still had my ace, though maybe I had let the time to use it slip away.

And so the conclusion continued. The resolution to the final scene.

A voice. A faint voice. And then, the gun barrel turned toward me.

She said something I couldn't hear, my ears still ringing from the gun blast. My eardrums were probably okay, just momentarily paralyzed. But in a situation like this, that meant

the same thing. It didn't look as if she were going to wait for my hearing to come back.

What did she say? It kind of bothered me. This was a checkmate.

Farewell. How stupid. What were you trying to do? You want to die in a place like this? What were you living for anyway?

She was probably saying something along those lines. Or no, maybe she wasn't saying anything at all.

Either way, there is no meaning in words you can't hear.

Just like there is no meaning in feelings you don't express.

Out of steam, I looked at her. Over Teruko-san's shoulder. Fast the muzzle of the gun.

"Ah."

Just as I thought. Just as I thought, this was the end.

Naturally I didn't believe anyone was coming to rescue me from this crisis… and this was pretty much what I expected to happen. Of course, I didn't mean to get Teruko-san involved, but aside from that, everything had gone more or less according to plan.

That's because my one and only plan was to not involve Kunagisa. Nothing else mattered. Really, it didn't matter. I was apathetic and indifferent. There was no future. There was no past. I had forgotten about being born long ago. Oblivious to the fact that I was alive. Reality was nothing more than a synonym for illusion to me, and that was never an antonym for dream.

At this point.

Teruko-san's body resting on me. My throbbing ankle pain. My paralyzed train of thought. My breaking values. My melting ethics. My collapsing morals. Kanami-san's neck. Akane-san's neck. The truth behind the incident. The culprit. The killer. The murderer.

The splitting girl. None of it mattered now. I would forgive it all.

So…

Pull that trigger. Please end it.

K-chink.

The sound of the gun cocking.

A sound I had heard a million times abroad.

And so, finally…

Here.

"Ii-chan!"

The sound of the door slamming open. Light pierced the room with such ferocity that my eyes stopped functioning for a moment. But there was no need for visual confirmation of who was pointing the gun on me. Even with my stunned eardrums, her voice had managed to reach me.

But I could barely believe it.

Kunagisa Tomo was standing there alone.

Ridiculous. That wasn't possible. I had left her on the first floor so that she *couldn't* do this. I had left her on the first floor because she was unable to climb stairs alone. She wasn't supposed to be able to come here alone.

But she was indeed alone. With tears in her eyes. She wore a terribly exhausted expression. She was panting. Clutching her chest. She looked as if she were ready to collapse at any moment, but she forced herself to remain standing.

And she was alone.

"This is…"

Wait a minute here. This can't be. Someone must be with her. If no one was with her, it would have been impossible for her to climb that spiral staircase. Maybe one or two steps, but not this.

It was impossible.

Had she really come all the way up here alone, despite her affliction?

All this way?

To be sure, it wasn't *physically* impossible. But obsessive-compulsive disorders aren't something to be taken lightly. They aren't so minor that you can just conquer them with willpower. I know for a fact that defying one's own subconscious is no walk in the park.

However… however, Kunagisa had heard the gunshot.

And despite it being deathly agonizing, despite it being so painful that in a worse-case scenario she really might have died, she had forced herself up the stairs. Forgetting to even bring someone along. Suppressing the urge to vomit. Clutching her own heart. Forcing those reluctant legs to keep moving. Lashing at her own fear-ridden soul. With that heart much too fragile for living. Enduring the anguish of the depths of Hell. All just to reach me. Casting all things aside. Kunagisa. For me.

"Why?"

The pressure. It was heartbreaking to the point of brutality. I really was a clown… feeling like this.

This pathetic feeling—what was the name for this?

"Why are you…"

Why are you always, *always*… shaking me up?

You.

Really. Since the ancient past.

Nothing's changed.

Fwip.

The woman removed me from her sights and retrained them on Kunagisa.

"Hey!"

What are you doing? You were going to shoot *me*. Why do you have to aim that gun over there? No such necessity exists, dammit. Or are such things meaningless to you? Are things like necessity and reality nonexistent in that skewed world in which you live?

The light.

Gradually my eyes were adjusting. Hers were probably doing the same. Kunagisa, however, who unlike us was adapting to the dark, not the light, couldn't yet make out my attacker's features. Dark adaptation takes longer than light adaptation. Consequently, if she were to shoot now, there was no way Kunagisa could dodge it.

I jumped up.

But by the time I was on my feet, it was too late. There was no point. There was no way I could make it to Kunagisa in time. I couldn't outrun a bullet. Even if I could, there would be no point. I couldn't just die in front of Kunagisa. I was too late. I was too late, just as I was years ago. Just like all the time.

In which case…

There was nothing I could d—

"Oh."

It seemed Kunagisa was able to spot me. Without even casting a glance at the handgun, without letting my attacker even enter her field of vision, she stuck a finger out at me and grinned.

"Ah, thank God. You're okay, right Ii-chan?"

With that smile. With that selfless smile. With that ragged, worn-out smile. With Kunagisa Tomo, who was completely oblivious to the circumstances.

I was…

Truly…

"I'm in love with her," I said to myself.

Yup. It was something I had always known. It was so obvious to me there was never a need to put it into words. There was no need for words between us.

Of course, it was a completely self-aware matter. From the instant I had met her, I had chosen Kunagisa Tomo. To the point that I didn't care about anything else. I didn't need to be loved or even chosen.

"Please stop," I begged my attacker.

She remained motionless for a while, but then, "Hehe. Hehehe…" She spun the gun around and pointed it at the ground. She continued laughing for a while.

"Hehehehehehe… haaaahahahaha…"

Like she was truly having a ball. Laughter like singing.

Dragging my feet, I made my way over to Kunagisa and grabbed her by the shoulders. Her body had become thoroughly hot. That was enough to discern just how much she had struggled to make it here. I held Kunagisa to cover her, and trained my eyes back on my attacker.

She was looking back at us. Looking at us holding on to each other.

"Well, I've still got some complaints, but"—she opened her mouth—"eh, from a guy like you, just hearing something that honest is good enough for now, I guess," she said. "That's what I was waiting to hear last night, after all," Sonoyama Akane said cynically, and tossed the handgun aside.

2

"Uwaaa, you've got a *huge* bruise here, Ii-chan."

With my pant leg rolled up, Kunagisa patted the bruise on my ankle. This blue-haired goon probably didn't realize how much that patting hurt. Hikari-san had brought me anti-swelling medication, so I stuck it on. It felt as if all the warmth had drained from my body.

This was comfort?

"Akane-chan was sooo tough. Not that she ever looked like much of a pushover," Kunagisa said. "Didn't you know, Ii-chan?"

"Why would I? Who could've known one of the Seven Fools would turn out to be so freaking tough? This isn't a video game or something."

She was a complete force to be reckoned with. I hadn't expected her to be so overwhelmingly tough, and I certainly hadn't expected her to have a handgun prepared. I had had a number of brushes with death by now, but this was by far the most dangerous.

"If Teruko-san hadn't come to my rescue, things would've gotten really bad."

"You have to be careful. That body doesn't belong to you alone, you know."

"Says you, woman."

Since the showdown, we had entered a phase of treating the wounded, dictated by common sense as the primary concern. At the time, I hadn't thought anything of it, but after a while, the damage from that initial leg sweep became much more apparent, so I was now undergoing treatment in Kunagisa's room.

"You hit your back as well, didn't you? Did it hurt?" Hikari-san said. "Please take care. Akane-san was in the karate club in high school, you know?"

"I think I've heard that before…"

"She even participated in the national tournament."

Man, teach *me* that stuff.

"Yeah, but apparently she only won five matches."

"You only need five matches to win the national tournament."

As for Akane-san's wounds, first there was her broken right arm. Then there was that first kick, which had apparently broken four ribs. Even in that early phase of the showdown she had suffered a major wound, yet she was still able to jump around like that. It was no small feat.

Meanwhile, Teruko-san was undergoing treatment with Akari-san. Skin around her throat had been scratched off from when Akane-san was strangling her, and there had been some bleeding, but she had suffered no other notable wounds. At the time of that gunshot, I had thought the bullet had hit her square in the back, but in fact it hadn't hit her at all. I thought she had fallen into my arms from the force of being shot, but it was actually the result of her dodging the bullet. Perhaps it was her reaction to the sound of the gun being cocked. She was like one of Charlie's Angels.

Not to mention that, afterward, she was playing dead.

"Actually, that's not quite right," Hikari-san said. "I'm sure she was just shielding you."

"Shielding me?" Indeed, depending on how you looked at it, that wasn't an impossibility. "So you're saying she was risking her life for me?"

"No, her life wasn't particularly in danger. Teruko's apron is bulletproof."

"Bulletproof?"

She wasn't an angel, she was a battle maid. What the hell had happened to reality?

"Yes. Spectra is sewn into her clothes. Unlike Kevlar, Spectra can withstand any number of shots without weakening. And it's light so you don't get sweaty. Teruko is nigh invincible at short range, but she takes caution with long-range defense. See how long the skirt is on this apron dress? That's because it works like an aikido *hakama*."

It sounded like a terrible joke, but it was hard to tell based on Hikari-san's expression. Maybe it was better to just let it go. "But why is Teruko-san so strong? Are you that strong, too?" I asked.

"No, Teruko is our mistress's resident bodyguard, in a sense. Our roles are fundamentally different. Up to now, you've never seen all three of us doing the same job, have you?"

Come to think of it, it did seem as if Hikari-san and Akari-san were always the ones at work. As a former participant in the ER3 program, maybe it was unforgivable that I hadn't noticed until now. Yeah, it sounded pretty bad.

"But I'm sure glad she rescued you. I'm sure you've noticed by now that she can be awfully cold. Saving you is one thing, but staking her own life to shield you… It almost doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, about that. Why did she do it?"

"Well, she's a whimsical girl."

Just like everyone else here.

But it wasn't completely beyond my comprehension. I still didn't know for sure how Teruko-san felt, but insofar as she was still a mystery to me, I was no doubt just as much a mystery to her.

Surely, she just wanted to ask about me.

"That's just a bunch of nonsense, though…"

Come to think of it, she had seemed abnormally strong when she grabbed my arm that afternoon, but I never would have imagined that that was some kind of foreshadowing.

"It seems like your back and hips are okay. You didn't hit your head, did you? Well then, that's a wrap," Kunagisa said, and, sticking close to me, began to massage my shoulders. This was Heaven.

"Now then, shall we head back to the dining room?"

This was Hell.

Right. The noninjured guests had all been left waiting anxiously for Kunagisa and me in the dining room. Unbelievably. Terrifyingly.

"Tomo, you go on alone. These injuries are way worse than I thought. I don't think I can go."

"Whatever. But y'know, Ii-chan, this is your chance to look good in front of Akari-chan. If you're smooth, you might get something out of it."

"Oh my, do you have Akari on the mind? She loves smart people, you know."

Kunagisa and Hikari-san were happily double-teaming me with suggestions. What were they, middle school students?

"Tomo, you know how much I hate stuff like that. You don't need me to explain it, right? Just think something up yourself."

"Ii-chan, didn't you do this kind of thing abroad? Performances or presentations or what have you?"

"Well, yeah, but they were Hell every time. They would always bitch at me, you know, like 'Quit talking around the subject' or 'You're being too vague' or 'Nobody's interested in your problems.' Ah, I know, I know. I should just do it, right? Just do it."

"Don't weasel out of this," Kunagisa's smirk said.

"Come on, you'll get in trouble. You have to be more cheerful about this. I know that's probably impossible for you, but anyway, let's get going. Tie my hair up first."

"Huh? You don't like it that way?"

"It feels like my head is being pulled on. One or two tails is better after all."

"Mmm, and here I liked it."

"Tomo-san, would you like me to do it?"

"Uh-uh," Kunagisa shook her head.

"Putting my hair up is Ii-chan's job."

Yes'm. I redid her hair, and…

…and our preparations were complete.

"Well, let's go."

Slowly the gates of Hell opened. I was feeling quite heavy-footed, and it wasn't just because of my injuries.

"What a buncha nonsense," I muttered as I arrived in the dining room. Everyone besides Akane-san, whose wounds were severe, was gathered together.

That of course included Shinya-san.

As if he had already given up, as if a burden had been taken off his shoulders, he had a calm air about him as he watched us walk through the door. Maki-san sneered at me,

making me think I was about to be harassed again, but she remained silent.

Lined up on the table was the remade food Yayoi-san had prepared while I was being treated. Possibly because Yayoi-san had calmed down, this time the food was remarkably fancier.

Akari-san, still feeling awkward, avoided eye contact. Teruko-san had bandages wrapped around her neck.

Rei-san watched over the scene in complete silence.

And then there was Akagami Iria-san. She was looking at me with challenging eyes.

"Well then, shall we have you begin?" Iria-san said to me as I took my seat. "What is all this?"

"Allow me to explain. Sonoyama Akane-san of the ER3's Seven Fools is the killer, and Ibuki Kanami-san's caretaker, Sakaki Shinya-san over there, is her accomplice."

Silence.

"And?"

"That's it."

"Give us thirty minutes," she insisted. "The first thing I want you to explain is what Sonoyama-san was doing in Yayoi's room."

"That's easy. Yayoi-san flew out of the dining room, right? Thus, Yayoi-san was the next person to be somewhere by herself, so Akane-san used it as an opportunity to kill her.

"The idea had been to have Akane-san's plan backfire, but instead things had backfired on me and Teruko-san had saved me. And ultimately I had had to rely on Akane-san's kindness."

That hatchet she had brandished at me, surely it would've lopped my head off.

"I'm very grateful to Teruko-san."

"No, I don't mean that. You know what I mean. Wasn't Sonoyama-san killed? In that sealed storage room?

"As you saw, she's alive." I shrugged. "Assuming she doesn't have a twin, I think we can all agree that it was Akane-san."

"So what about that headless body in the storage room?"

"Well, Akane-san is alive, so that wasn't her body. That's just logical thinking."

"It was someone else's corpse?"

"If you see a headless body, beware of switching. It's a cardinal rule of detective novels, right? I'm sure your darling detective would say the same thing."

Iria-san tilted her head at me as if to show that this was beyond her comprehension. "Um, just wait a second. I'm thinking."

She wanted a moment to contemplate things alone. I was a bit impressed by her spirit. "Umm…"

"Well, in the meantime, might I ask something?" Shinya-san raised his hand. "I've got a question for you there."

"I don't mind," I nodded. I thought for sure I'd be asked when I realized the truth behind the incidents or how I figured out the killer or something like that, but Shinya-san's question was totally different from my expectations.

"Is that wound on your foot okay?"

"Yes. It's made a bruise, though."

"Really? So it's not broken. That woman…" he snorted. "Or maybe she *couldn't* break it, though that's not like her… or is it?"

I wasn't sure what all his whispering meant.

Finally, "Nah, it's no good," Iria-san said capitulatingly. "I don't get it at all. There was really a switch?"

"There was. Kunagisa's computers were destroyed, right? The third incident. *Nobody* could have done that. Literally, precisely nobody. Everybody served as everybody else's witness, so alibis and accomplices weren't even a matter of concern. We were all watching one another the whole time. Nobody could have done it. Nobody who was there, anyway. Therefore, the only person who could've done it would have been someone who wasn't there with us. That's just logical thinking."

"I gathered that much," Iria-san said. "You don't need to keep emphasizing that it's logical. You're kind of a smart aleck, aren't you? So *whose* headless body was that in the storage room? Everybody was here together. There wasn't a single person who could have been switched with Sonoyama-san's body. Isn't that strange to you?"

"Well, it is strange, but…" I decided to give her an easy-to-understand analogy. "Do you know this quiz? Or actually, it's more like a trick or a form of fraud, but anyway…"

I pulled out the alibi chart and turned it over to the back. There I drew a big rectangle, then drew nine lines through it. In other words, a ten-box chart.

"What is that?" Iria-san asked. "Something to do with this?"

"Please pretend these are telephone booths. Ten telephone booths. Now let's put eleven people in them."

"Phone booths?"

"Oh, I mean, they're just boxes. They could be rooms."

"Ten rooms."

"Yup," I nodded.

Incidentally, this was a magic trick I had picked up from a book I read while in elementary school.

"Okay, so let's say A-kun tries to enter the first box, but a second person enters it before him." I wrote an X in the first box. "Now for the third person." I wrote an X in the next box. "The fourth person." I wrote yet another X in the next box. "The fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth people. The ninth person, and the tenth person. So now we've got ten people in boxes. But there's still one box left over. So let's stick that first guy, A-kun, in there." I drew an X in the final box. "And so we've fit eleven people in ten boxes. Do you get it?"

"That's stupid," Iria-san said. "The first person never entered the box, so it was off by one person."

"Yes, that's correct. It's a rudimentary trick that anyone can figure out with a little thought. But if done with the right timing and skill, nobody notices."

"Yes they do."

"They don't. *We* didn't notice."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about. And this is all off-topic. I'm asking whose body that was in the storage room. Everybody was gathered here. No matter how you look at it, that makes us one person short. Or are you saying there was a thirteenth person on this island?

"Not possible. There were twelve people on this island. Let's assume that's a given."

"Well then, who was it?"

"As of now, there are eleven people alive on this island. Akagami Iria-san, Chiga Akari-san, Hikari-san and Teruko-san, Handa Rei-san, Himena Maki-san, Sashirono Yayoi-san, Kunagisa Tomo, Sakaki Shinya-san and Sonoyama Akane-san. Then, finally, there's me. So the answer should be clear."

I allowed a brief pause.

"It was Ibuki Kanami-san."

3

"With the corpse wrapped up in a sleeping bag, it didn't get dirty even when we buried it. After we left the burial site, Shinya-san dug Kanami-san's body back up. Then, with body in tow, he headed for the storage room window. From the outside, I mean. He knocked on the window and Akane-san opened it from the inside. In went the body, and they made the switch. That's basically it."

Taking a look over the crowd to see their reaction, especially Shinya-san's, I continued.

"It was strange. When we went to bury Kanami-san's body, Shinya-san brought a sleeping bag along. It was a coffin. But hold the phone there a second. Why would he have a sleeping bag? Maybe if this was a camping trip, but nobody would bring a sleeping bag when they've been invited to a mansion. So maybe it was already at the mansion to begin with? See, that's what I had thought. I thought Iria-san had offered it to him for the sake of the burial. Certainly in a mansion like this, a mansion that offers beds with canopies even in the guest rooms, it's a little unnatural for there to be sleeping bags lying around, but it's not impossible. So that's what I thought. But the second time, when Akane-san's corpse—actually Kanami-san's corpse again—was discovered, Hikari-san brought us a stretcher. Is there some reason you would offer a sleeping bag for the first person but not for the second? Not likely. Even if there was a reason, Hikari-san would've told me. And so one assumption crumbles. There were no sleeping bags here after all. Shinya-san must have brought one himself even though this isn't camping. It's as if he knew from the start he would

need something in which to bury a body. He knew that he couldn't let the body get dirty."

"So he… *recycled* the body?"

"Bingo, you've got it. Shinya-san and Akane-san murdered Kanami-san and from her created a new, 'phantom' corpse. That's basically it."

"But there was blood in the storage room," Iria-san said. "If that body was a day old, there wouldn't have been so much blood."

"There was no way for us to determine whether or not that was Akane-san's blood. Maybe the police could have. Indeed, if the police were here, this crazy incident never would have happened. But you didn't want to call the police. Understandable. Due to certain circumstances, you couldn't call them. Knowing that, Akane-san was free to assume that even if there was another incident, the police wouldn't come. The blood could have been from a blood bank or even from an animal. We'll have to ask Akane-san or Shinya-san to find out."

But Shinya-san remained silent, refusing to answer. I let it be and continued. "In the same sense, if the police had been here, they could have told us that the body was a day old already. But we're not professionals. All we know is the difference between dead and alive. Maybe after ten days we'd be able to discern the age of the corpse, and maybe a little faster in the summer, but this isn't the summer. This is the season of blooming cherry blossoms."

"So they changed the corpse's clothes?"

"Yes. Akane-san called Hikari-san to her room in the middle of the night just to show her what she was wearing. Kanami-san's body was already in the room at that time. That

room has an inward-opening door, so all she had to do was hide the body in the shadows behind it. As long as she came out to greet Hikari-san, Hikari-san wouldn't enter the room. This was likely the riskiest part of the whole ploy. If there was ever a point that proved Akane-san was going out on a limb, it was this scene. But she had to go out on a limb. As I said before, she did it so that she could make us all think Kanami-san's body was hers. Also, to narrow down the time of the murder and to give her accomplice, Shinya-san, a solid alibi."

That night, Shinya-san was with Maki-san drinking the whole night. Maki-san had invited him, but supposing she hadn't, he probably would've invited her. Or it's even possible that he would have invited us instead of Maki-san. Of course, now that all was said and done, that was just a trivial detail.

"That's also why they smashed Kunagisa's PCs. The PCs and digital camera contained images. Images of Kanami-san's corpse. If we carefully compared those images with Akane-san's corpse in the storage room, there was a chance that we would realize they were in fact the same body."

"Actually, that's true," Kunagisa said. "Something had been bothering me. The hands, or the fingers or something. Yeah, that's it, huh? It's not like Kanami-chan and Akane-chan have the same fingerprints."

She let out a sigh. It seemed she was disappointed in herself for not noticing right off the bat. Everyone else probably thought she was joking, but I knew she probably wasn't.

For crying out loud.

"But why would they do such a thing?"

"There are altogether too many possibilities as far as that's concerned, but in my opinion she was trying to 'erase her

existence.' Akane-san created a phantom 'thirteenth person' by using the same body twice, and in so doing succeeded in erasing her own existence. There are plenty of hiding places around here. It's a huge mansion, and many of the rooms aren't locked. And there's always the possibility she was outside the mansion."

"Why would she need to erase her own existence?"

"That's simple. Isn't it obvious? If she became a victim, if she herself was murdered, she would no longer be under surveillance. She would be free to move about, beyond the confines of thought and reason, like some kind of invisible woman. In which case, breaking Kunagisa's computers, for example, became a simple task. Even causing a fourth incident, such as another murder, would have been simple. But again, we won't know for sure what they had planned unless we ask Akane-san or Shinya-san."

"We were going to kill everyone."

This time he was gracious enough to answer. He spoke with a coldness that told of his complete surrender. He spoke with indifference.

"Everyone on this island. But to do so, she had to remove herself. It became apparent that her ability to move around would be cut off, either by the forming of teams or by having everyone stay together in one place, so she had to remove herself from everyone."

And once she was on the outside, she would just start picking people off one at a time, starting with the easiest prey. Shinya-san let out a weak chuckle. "And here she did such a good job of removing herself from the party. I never would've thought she wouldn't even be able to kill a single person. I thought she'd at least get through half of you."

"Shall we have you explain the rest then, Shinya-san?"

"No," he shook his head weakly. "I'll leave it all to you. That's your role here. It's your job."

I nodded without saying anything. "Well then, I don't think I need to explain the first sealed room at this point, do I? That was just a trick to distract us. They just needed to buy time until the second incident. It might not have been specifically planned to go down that way, but rather just a coincidental product of the Law of Great Numbers. Maybe the earthquake just happened to occur and she thought of it right then. Of course she was planning the murder all along, but maybe she only decided on a specific plan once the earthquake occurred. Supposing that was the case, it was some incredibly quick thinking. You can't help but be impressed. Anyway, there was an earthquake. Then Shinya-san called. However, it wasn't Kanami-san on the other end, but Akane-san. Then Akane-san killed Kanami-san. Shinya-san said Kanami-san had said 'the paint spilled,' but that, too, was a trick. He used vague wording so that even if the trick was exposed, he could weasel out of it. Even I was tricked by that."

"Heh heh," Shinya-san laughed.

"That's simply a coincidence."

"Well, I can't speak as to that, but anyway, Akane-san killed Kanami-san. Then she put together that 'sealed room.' By intentionally spilling the paint."

"Well, at least I wasn't wrong when I originally said she was the killer."

"That's right, Iria-san. Certainly it was a high possibility. But that's all it was. Because Akane-san had created that sealed room, we couldn't say for certain. Of course, that was the whole point of the sealed room. To put herself under the

'perfect level of suspicion,' she placed herself in a position where she was the prime suspect, but where nobody could prove that she did it. Then she was locked in the storage room.

"Granted, I was the one who had suggested it, but even if I hadn't said anything, Shinya-san surely would have. There were only so many rooms with locking doors, so it would have been easy for them to guess where she would be held, and there had already been plenty of time for them to get to know the mansion. Of course, we can only speculate here, and if you don't feel like talking to Shinya-san about it, we'll never know the true answer."

On that note, it seemed to me that Akane-san's big tiff with Kanami-san was also done to intentionally show their sour relationship. Akane-san had *wanted* to put herself in that risky position.

You know, for later on.

I didn't know whether the fact that Akane-san was the only one without an alibi (well, actually Rei-san, too) was pure luck, or whether she had figured out a whole strategy. But it was probably just a coincidence.

That's what I thought.

"So then she switched with Ibuki-san's body?" Iria-san said. "And then showed herself to Hikari-san in the middle of the night, put the clothes she had been wearing on Ibuki-san, escaped, and… then she hid away somewhere in the mansion, right? Then during dinner she was hiding right by the dining hall listening in on Sashirono-san's hysteria. She overheard her saying she was going to lock herself up in her room. So she turned back and hid herself in Sashirono-san's room. There's no lock, after all. Then there was the setup. Hmm, so that

means Sashirono-san's breaking down and accusing Hikari was all a ruse you set up, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I nodded. "We could've just found her at that point if we had searched the whole mansion, but it's so huge. It just seemed like it would be a big hassle, so we set a trap instead. It was risky, though."

"The amazing thing about you is that you were able to just write that off as 'risky.' "

I didn't know who was speaking for a second, but it turned out to be Maki-san. It was the first time she had given me a compliment without a hint of sarcasm. I was just a little bit pleased.

"But hang on a second." Iria-san placed a hand on her own head and remained like that for a moment. "Something still seems off," she said. "Hmm, what is it? Something seems strange to me."

"Are you wondering how Akane-san got out of the storage room?"

"Yeah, that's it!" Iria-san said with a clap of her hands. "That's it. You haven't explained that yet. Did Shinya-san pull her up? Did she literally switch places with the corpse?"

"Nope. Shinya-san was only outside the mansion when we buried Kanami-san's body in the mountains. At that time, he did drop the body into the storage room, but he didn't pull Akane-san out. Hikari-san saw her the following night at two a.m., right? Plus, Shinya-san had an alibi that night as well. So he couldn't have pulled Akane-san out. That much is certain."

"Then did he drop a rope ladder down there or something?"

"That's not it, either. A rope ladder would've left a hole somewhere. I suppose it would've been possible if the rope

was long enough, but Hikari-san saw that the window was closed at two a.m. Akane-san couldn't have tied the rope outside from the inside of her room. She would've needed an accomplice, but as I said, Shinya-san was busy at the time creating an alibi for himself with Maki-san."

"Then it's impossible," Iria-san pouted. "My head is spinning in circles. I feel like I've got cyanosis here."

"You must mean vertigo."

"That's the only kind of thing you ever explain, huh?" she grimaced. "Well? You must know the answer, right?"

"Yup," I nodded.

"She was locked in a room with a door that can only be unlocked from the outside, and a window that opens freely, and she wanted to get out. Iria-san, what would you have done in that situation?"

"I can't possibly imagine."

Spoken like a true princess.

"Well, what about you, Akari-san?"

I had already explained it to Hikari-san and Yayoi-san, so I asked Akari-san. I could've asked Teruko-san, Rei-san, or even Maki-san, but Akari-san was my favorite, after all, and I was hoping to break the awkwardness lingering from the morning's events.

"I… I guess I would stretch my arms up and jump."

"Right. But even if you jumped, you wouldn't reach the window."

"We're talking about the storage room, right? If I was locked in there, and jumping didn't work… next I would try standing on a chair, stretching my arms up and jumping."

"Even then you don't reach."

"Then it's simple," she said with a forced cheerful expression. "I'd give up."

"That won't move this conversation anywhere."

"Well, it's over, right?"

Wow, she was blunt. Maybe it wasn't awkwardness, maybe she just plain hated me. Well, whatever. Time to change the channel.

"Akari-san says she would have used a chair. That's basically what anybody would do, right? Like a monkey trying to reach a high-hanging banana."

"Are you calling me a monkey?" she screamed, her face bright red. "Aren't you rude! You don't know the meaning of the word *delicacy*, do you? Are you trying to infuriate me?"

My mistake. It seemed I had changed the channel in the wrong direction.

"No, that's not what I meant. And you don't have to get so angry. Monkeys are adorable."

"I've never been so insulted in my entire life." She cast her face away from me. "From now on you and I don't know each other."

Her disdain for me was unquestionably clear. I was a little bit shocked. Dammit, Kunagisa, what about impressing her with my smarts? It was the exact opposite outcome.

"Um, that's not good. Anyway, you stand on a chair. Just like anyone would. You jump, you stretch your arms out. You still don't reach. So what now? It's simple. You just get on a taller chair."

"There's only one chair in that room."

"Well, 'chair' is just a metaphor. It could be anything. So what was in that room?"

"Nothing. Books? The futon? A lamp and table?"

"There was something else, wasn't there? Something we all saw. It was practically *all* we saw."

A silence fell over the crowd. Maybe they couldn't think of it, maybe they had thought of it. Either way would've warranted such a reaction.

It was Iria-san who finally answered.

"It was Ibuki-san's corpse, wasn't it?"

"Bingo," I nodded.

What else needed to be said?

"Rigor mortis reaches its peak at around the first twenty-four-hour mark—well, depending on your sources. It was about two a.m., give or take, so almost exactly that much time had passed since Kanami-san was killed. Her body was probably stiff as a pole. I'm sure getting those clothes on her was no cakewalk, but there were merits here as well. I guess it had an upside and a downside."

"No cakewalk? It was a suit, for crying out loud. How do you get that on a stiff corpse? Maybe her joints were still moving, but still…"

"Then she could've brought two pairs of the same outfit. That way she could get it on the body while it was still relatively loose in the afternoon. Maybe Kanami's removed dress was hiding behind the door," I continued without pausing. "I arrived at this train of thought based on her reason for cutting off the head. That was, of course, so that Kanami's body could play the role of two people. Her face was a hindrance. But I believe there is one more reason she cut off the head. She may be the only person to have ever cut off someone's head for this reason. Yup. *To flatten her shoulders*."

"You mean because if she hadn't done that, if the shoulders weren't flat, she couldn't have used them as a step? Because

Kanami-san wasn't a sturdy stepping stool?" Akari-san asked weakly, as if stricken with fear, or else hoping for some other answer.

"Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes," I nodded. "Not just a step, but a 'staircase.' First she placed the chair, then stood Kanami-san's body up next to it, letting it lean against the wall a little. Then she used the chair as her first step, the body as her second, and made a final leap. Like a hop, step, and jump maneuver. Then she stretched out her arms and finally reached the window."

Kanami-san was always confined to a wheelchair, so I wasn't sure of her exact height, but considering Akane-san had thought to recycle the body that way, she was probably about as tall as Akane-san. And that was none too petite. Even without the head, she was at least five feet tall. If you added Akane-san's own height, it was a little over ten feet. Plus she was extending her arms. Plus she jumped. As long as her hand made it to the window, all she had to do was pull herself up. The impact from the jump probably caused Kanami-san's body to topple over, but that was all the better. It would be hard for anyone to tell the body had been used as a step.

And that's exactly why the head had been lopped off from the very base of the neck.

"It couldn't have been that easy. I mean, come on…"

"She didn't have to succeed right away. I mean, she could have tried any number of times. It's not the type of thing you can do in one or two tries, but eventually she succeeded, and knocked Kanami-san's body down in the process. To be greedy, she probably wanted to close the window, too, but you can only do that from the inside, so she probably just gave up on it. When we went and examined Akane-san's—by

which I mean Kanami-san's—body the next day, the peak of the rigor mortis had already passed, and the body had become somewhat loose again. Of course I'm no specialist, so I can't really say for certain."

"That's…" Akari-san was turning blue. It was the same broken down Akari-san I had encountered this morning. Infuriated, or deep in despair. "It's too terrible. It's too terrible. I can't forgive this. To kill a person, and on top of that cut her head off, and then dig up her buried corpse, and on top of *that* disguise it as the body of someone else… that alone is unspeakably foul. But to then use the body as a chair, as a *staircase*, as a *stepping stool*?"

" 'It's difficult to sit on a living person. To sit on a living person for nearly thirty minutes is nearly impossible. But I wouldn't say sitting on a dead person is very hard at all,' " Shinya-san recited. "The words of Oe Kenzaburo. Don't you know it, Akari-san?"

Still blue in the face, Akari-san shook her head with a look of disgust. She looked like a small frightened animal. Like she wanted to deny reality.

I couldn't help but sigh.

A corpse is something that's been thoroughly spent, with no sentience or personality or even a spirit remaining inside it, just as it no longer has a will or an essence. It is nothing more than a "thing." And the owner of that "thing" utters no complaint as to what might become of it, and even supposing it wanted to, he or she was in no place to do so.

There was a headless body. She recycled it as her own body.

There was a headless body. She used it as a staircase.

So what?

When you die, that's the end. The fact that you lived is irrelevant. It's nothing more than a fact. Everybody has a different idea about it, and that's their right; you can't complain about what others believe.

I let out another sigh.

"So that's it, Iria-san. The minor details are a pain to explain, so please think about them for yourself. I'm sure there's an easy answer for everything else. Unfortunately, I'm not a nice enough guy to explain it all. Please reason things out on your own."

"The minor details, huh?" Iria-san said. "What about the motive? I don't think you can write that off as a trivial or minor detail."

"You'll have to ask the murderers directly."

I repeated the same line I had already said a number of times by this point, and looked over at Shinya-san. So did everyone else. With a look of capitulation, Shinya-san prepared to give an answer, when a voice came from behind my back.

"You don't have to answer that, Shinya."

I looked back. Standing in the entrance to the dining room was Akane-san. She was supposed to be resting in the bedroom. How long had she been there? How much of my nonsense had she heard?

Her arm was in a brace, but she still wore a fearless expression as she looked down upon the crowd sitting at the round table.

"Akane-san…"

ER3 system, Seven Fools, Sonoyama Akane.

Akane-san, who had claimed that she would never complain, no matter who, when, why, or how she was killed.

But did that just mean she would forgive *herself* no matter who, when, why, or how she killed?

"Hah," she laughed. "Motive? Motive, you say? How silly. What a meaningless thing that is in a world this big. It hurts my brain to think about why you would even care about such trivia. I don't get it at all." She gave a sardonic smile as she continued. "I was just trying to eat those brains of yours."

Akagami Iria, mistress of Wet Crow's Feather Island.

Handa Rei, head maid at the mansion.

ONE WEEK LATER

SPLIT

Where are you?
Who are you?

1

As luck would have it, just as Kunagisa and I had originally planned, we were able to return to the mainland on the afternoon exactly one week after we had arrived. Kunagisa having a tendency (albeit not as compulsive as her vertical motion thing) to hate changing plans once she's made them, this set me at ease a bit.

But if you looked back, Kunagisa's original purpose in coming to the island was, at least in part, to satisfy her interest in the "various things" that had occurred there in the past. I asked her about it.

"My investigation is basically over," she said.

It seemed *she* had been up to some "various things" herself. Not that I wasn't wondering what she had been up to, but if that was the case, there was no problem for now. I just wanted to get home anyway.

I sat on a sofa in a room on the same cruiser that had brought us to the island. Kunagisa lay sleeping on the sofa across from me.

Now that we were set to return to the mainland, I had half expected something to happen with Hikari-san or Akari-san, but they gave nothing more than the usual, dutiful formalities. *Thank you very much. Please visit again if you have the chance. Take care now.* I don't even have to get into Teruko-san's farewell. She left me without a single word, as if to say, "I've already spoken to you enough to last a lifetime."

But whatever.

That's how my life goes.

Sonoyama Akane-san and Sakaki Shinya-san.

The two perpetrators of this crime were of course no longer allowed to stay on the island, and were currently laying low in the next room. I didn't know what they might be talking about.

We were heading back to the mainland as planned, and they were heading back because they had been kicked out. It was technically the opposite of being island exiled, but if you thought about it, the word *mainland* was wholly subjective.

Yayoi-san and Maki-san remained on the island.

Yayoi-san's doubts regarding Iria-san and Rei-san seemed to have been swept away, but I wondered if that was enough. Of course, it was up to Yayoi-san to decide how she lived her own life, and not my place to butt in.

As for Maki-san… that woman was a sly fox to the very end.

"So how much did you really know?" I asked her before leaving the island.

Maki-san responded with an ambiguous smile.

"Well, you know. Maybe I don't really know anything. Like the whole thing was really just an act."

"You know, I get the impression you knew about Akane-san and Shinya-san's plans all along, and you were aiding them in creating alibis."

"What if I was?" she said nonchalantly. "What if I was?"

"Then you're an accomplice. That's all."

"But it's not like I had heard anything from Shinya-san, and he didn't try to tell me anything."

"If he had, you would've been abetting a murder. You invited him over two nights in a row, helping him create an alibi that was hard for me to trace. So what's the real story? If you were really cooperating with Shinya-san, then…"

"Then what?"

"Nothing. I guess nothing would happen," I shrugged. "Nothing at all."

Maki-san snickered at me.

In reality I wanted to tell her something, but there was no point. If she really possessed those powers there was no need to say anything, and even if she didn't there was no need.

It's just that I had doubts. Shinya-san and Akane-san's serial murder plot just seemed too perfect, like it relied on one too many coincidences. In presenting my findings to Iria-san, I had made great efforts to step around that. It's not that their plans had been sloppy. It was like they had been unrehearsed, yet at the same time, everything had been prepared ahead of time. Or rather, it felt like luck was very much on their side… Yeah, it was like they had factored in coincidences and made friends with luck. As if the layout of the entire island and everything on it were on their side.

"Nonsense, huh?"

Of course they probably were all just coincidences, and probably just examples of the Law of Great Numbers, and those two had simply won a bet, so to speak. Anything will look fishy if you think about it selectively.

"Occam's razor?"

However.

On that island was someone who knew everything, and I do mean *everything*, even the future.

Was even this a coincidence?

Sigh.

Indeed, it probably was. I could draw no other conclusion. Even if it wasn't a coincidence, it was all over already, and there would be no way to prove it, plus Shinya-san and Akane-san sure weren't talking, so there was no point in pursuing it. Even if there was a point, it had nothing to do with me, and even if it had something to do with me, I wasn't interested.

So that was the situation. Instead, I asked a question.

"Are you the one who told Teruko-san I was in trouble?"

There was no reason anyone should've known I was about to be done in by Akane-san in Yayoi-san's room, and thus there was no reason Teruko-san should have conveniently busted in with all the grace and good timing of an action heroine like that.

Unless there was someone who could predict the future, that is.

"Do you think I would do something like that?"

"No."

"Then I probably didn't, did I?"

She gave me a wicked smile. I decided any further inquiry would be meaningless, so I didn't even thank her. There was no reason to.

"I wonder what's going to happen now. To the island, to Iria-san…"

"Mmm." Maki-san gave an expectedly short response.

I shrugged once. "Well, how about telling me what's going to happen to me and Kunagisa? As a continuation to that 'compatibility reading' from the other night. Are the two of us going to stay like this forever?"

"My readings are expensive."

"In that case I'll have to decline," I said.

"The two of you will stay that way for a little while longer," she said, answering me the very second I had given up. What a perverse contrarian.

"A little while?"

"Yes, a little while."

"How long?"

"Two years plus change."

I tilted my head at her.

"You mean it'll turn into something else after two years? Or it'll completely fade away?"

"Well, I don't know." She laughed a bit cynically. "I can't see more than two years into the future."

Hadn't heard that before. I probably failed to hide my surprised expression.

"It's a secret though," she continued. "So I don't know what will become of you and Kunagisa-chan two years from now."

"You mean that's the limit of your power?"

"I mean I'm going to die," she said plainly. "Time is not on my side. As far as I'm concerned, all time stops at that point. Two years from now, on March 21, at 3:23 p.m. That's the date and time that I will die."

All I could do was be silent.

"Spewing guts and brains all over the place, it'll be a fitting death for a heretic like me."

"Can't you avoid it?"

"When the time comes, be sure to get my killer. Just like you did this time. I'm asking you now as a favor."

"What's the point in asking a favor if you won't be able to see whether or not I've fulfilled it?"

"That's true," she seemed to say as she stuck out her right hand, her chest out as if to express pride that she, too, had an unforeseeable future.

"Let's shake hands."

"Sure. Might not be bad to pretend we're friends now that we're at the very end."

Even having said that, I couldn't grab her hand.

I still had no idea why she had picked on me so much. It probably didn't matter, and it was probably actually better that way.

However…

I still had some doubts.

"Excuse me." The cabin door opened and in walked Rei-san. "We'll be docking soon. Please get ready."

"Sure," I replied.

Time to wake up Kunagisa.

She seemed to be sleeping awfully comfortably so I didn't really want to, but I couldn't just leave her be. Although that would have been pretty funny.

"Um, thank you so much for everything." Rei-san took the time to say. "You, especially. We're grateful to Kunagisa-san as well, but you…"

"Did you have a blast, Akagami Iria-san?"

"Sure," Rei-san nodded without any particular sign of surprise. "You bet. I had tons of fun."

Akagami Iria-san grinned a genuinely happy grin. A smile she hadn't given once during her performance as Rei-san. This wasn't acting, it was a real, human smile.

"How did you know Rei and I switched? Since when?"

"I just thought of it now. It was just a wild guess. I figured if I was wrong you'd just get a little ticked off, it wasn't like a breach of your human rights or anything," I said to her. "If you had left this room quicker I probably wouldn't have even noticed, or at least I wouldn't have said anything."

"Is that right?" she nodded. "I always get sloppy at the end, huh? My grandfather used to say it all the time. But you must have had some reason to think that. Please, enlighten me."

"What's it to you?"

"I can use it as future reference."

She was going to keep doing this?

"Well, yeah. Yayoi-san still hasn't noticed, plus Maki-san… well, I don't know about her."

She snickered. Seeing her childish demeanor, she seemed to lack a certain refinement in comparison to the "real" Iria-san, the one on the island—Rei-san, that is. It was like the fake version was more real than the real one.

She just seemed to be very free.

"Well, let's see," I said. "You didn't talk very much, did you, Iria-san? It was so unnatural. I'm sure you thought that if you spoke you would give yourself away, but on the other

hand, not talking at all was just as much of a blunder. So you made Teruko-san act silent as well to create a sort of universal 'lack of presence,' thereby covering yourself."

"No, that's just her nature," Iria-san said. "I can tell her apart from the other two even if she's not wearing her glasses. 'Cause she never talks."

Apparently that was her nature.

Well, if you thought about it, it didn't really seem like Teruko-san had been acting.

"Is that right? Well, either way, I figured if that Iria-san was an imposter, there was only one possible person it could have been. After all, Akari-san, Hikari-san, and Teruko-san are triplets. I guess it's a little counterintuitive that they couldn't have swapped places *because* they're triplets."

"You said it," she smiled.

It was the smile of someone addressing an equal.

At least that's what I thought.

"And then there was something about your aura. Like, Teruko-san never seemed to be doing much work. That's because she was mainly your bodyguard. But I never saw Rei-san do much work, either. I was wondering about that."

"I poured your tea, didn't I?"

"Yeah, it was great." I had forgotten to thank her earlier. "Oh yeah, and also, the first time I visited your room, you were sitting on the sofa and Iria-san was standing. It seemed like it should've been the other way around."

"My, my." She was gleeful. I supposed Rei-san had been copying such mannerisms all along, but there was nothing like the real thing. "Go on."

"Right. Where was I…"

If you thought about it, Akari-san and Hikari-san obviously knew about the switch, which meant that they, too, were quite the pair of little actresses. Especially Hikari-san. As spry and pitiable as she was, I never would've guessed she was lying all along.

Somebody owed her an Oscar.

"The nail in the coffin was when the fake Iria-san covered for you. That night 'Iria-san' and Yayoi-san were together talking all night. Makes sense, right? Rei-san was probably asking her for culinary advice. She's really a maid, after all, so it wouldn't be that strange if she had an interest in cooking."

"Yeah, Yayoi-san believes Rei is me, so she doesn't ever spend much time with the real me. That was my miscalculation." she sulked. "And hey, come to think of it, where does Rei get off imitating me like that? I don't change my clothes in front of random people, and my personality isn't that crappy."

Apparently her personality wasn't that crappy.

Hmm, sounded like another lie to me.

"So what were you really doing that night, anyway?"

"That's a secret."

"It's a secret?"

"A lady never discloses her evening's affairs," she said mysteriously.

I had a feeling if I pressed any further it would just tick her off, so I decided to let it go. I wasn't looking for any more trouble. I didn't like "making waves," after all.

"Anyway, even though 'Iria-san' did nothing to protect Hikari-san, even treating her like a criminal, she went as far as lying to save *your* hide. Why? Because Rei-san is closer to Iria-san than Hikari-san is? Maybe. But something about that

answer doesn't float my boat. Living on a deserted island like that, I would think you'd all get pretty close and cozy. And I don't think human beings are such a cold species."

"That's true," Iria-san said. "Those girls are like my family. My precious family, who stayed by my side even after I was exiled."

Exiled.

And the reason for that exile?

"Even so, 'Iria-san' protected 'Rei-san' but not Hikari-san. Why? Could it be because 'Rei-san' was really her superior, someone she had sworn allegiance to?" I clapped my hands together. "Something like that, right?"

"You're marvelous. I want to hug you."

"I don't mind."

"I will refrain," she giggled innocently.

"This time I have a question. Why exactly did you switch places with Rei-san and pose as a maid? Was it because, as the granddaughter of the Akagami family, you couldn't show yourself unguarded in front of the guests, even though you were exiled?"

There was no guarantee that there wasn't some unsavory individual mixed in with all those geniuses. As our prior investigation had indicated, sometimes these things happen.

Thus, she had prepared an imposter—a body double.

Was that it?

But Iria-san shook her head daintily. "Nope," she said. "I just wanted to see who would notice first. Just a little prank. No reason, really."

A prank.

It was the kind of line that made your knees wobble, and I didn't think she was lying this time. And until now, not a single one of those so-called geniuses had caught on.

In all these years, unnoticed by anyone, geniuses are nothing special.

Perhaps that was what Iria-san thought. And she would probably continue to think so.

"But you noticed."

"If you hadn't gone a little too far at the end there, I wouldn't have. Even if I had noticed, I wouldn't have said anything. You should have just stayed at the mansion instead of coming on this boat with us."

"Well, I have to go apologize to Aikawa-san for all the unnecessary hoopla. There's still a visit scheduled. We're going to meet straight after dropping you off. Oh, Aikawa-san's going to be ticked. Not a person you want to see get angry. Even though it's inevitable. Plus, well, I wanted to talk to you like this. You showed me such a good time, after all."

"It's an honor."

"Say," she said sweetly, "won't you return to the mansion sometime? Kunagisa-san, Maki-san, Yayoi-san, and you. I think you'd make a terrific family. I hear you've taken a liking to Akari and Hikari. I don't mind letting you have your way with them."

"That's not the kind of thing you say to a family member."

"True, but I'm serious. I'm always serious. So how about it? Like my proposition?" She stuck her tongue out at me.

At this point I was becoming disgusted. You couldn't just write this off as free-spiritedness or vibrancy or lack of restraint.

"I don't like murderers."

"Ehehehehe," Iria-san laughed.

I didn't know why she was laughing.

"Regardless of their reasons?"

"Regardless of their reasons."

She nodded. "I'm not sure what you heard from Hikari and Teruko, but you can't possibly be thinking they told you anything but the truth. Those girls are generally liars. I think the fact that they never told you about me and Rei's switch is proof enough of that."

"Eh…?"

"The reason I didn't call the police was simply because it wouldn't have been any fun that way. Absolute authority is so unromantic," she said as she rolled up her left sleeve. This revealed a lovely, *perfectly unscarred* arm. "Please excuse me then," she said with a smile, and left the room.

"Hey, hey…"

Sigh…

Sure didn't see that coming.

What was real and what was fake?

Who was real and *who* was fake?

It's a mixed-up world, and I for one never claimed to know anything, nor do I think all people are honest and all things are as they seem.

What was it?

The truth.

"Man, what a load of tomfoolery."

It wouldn't be long now. I thought to wake up Kunagisa, but seeing her peaceful face as she mewed like a kitten made me lose the motivation. It wouldn't be too late to wake her up after we reached the coast. The rule of thumb is, the longer you can stay dreaming, the better.

Nevertheless.

Family?

"Man, I'm gonna regret turning down that proposition," I said to no one in particular, expecting no response. But I knew there was only one response one could give. For me, there was only one person I could ever call family. "What a load of nonsense," I muttered in the usual way.

Aikawa Jun,
most powerful private contractor
in the World.

EPILOGUE

CRIMSON FAIRY TALE

A week had passed since returning to the mainland.

I finally began attending school, but finding myself hopelessly unable to adapt due to my late start, I just couldn't get into the mood. And thus I found myself cutting morning classes, walking down West Main Street. What you call a mental health day, or "playing hooky," if you want to be a jerk about it.

"What the hell was I doing all that time before coming back to Japan?" My self-directed mutterings were more or less heartfelt, but they were probably mostly meaningless. Whether I was in ER3, Kyoto, or Wet Crow's Feather Island, it had changed me little, just as leaving a five-year blank had hardly changed Kunagisa.

"Hmm, more nonsense?" I muttered as I continued my stroll. I turned south, thinking I'd head back to my Nakadachiuri apartment and do some reading, but on the way I remembered today was the day Kunagisa's favorite magazine went on sale, so I stopped in a local bookstore to buy a copy.

"Kunagisa Tomo?"

Since the island incidents, Kunagisa had stayed holed up in her house. She was deeply immersed in making all sorts of repairs on the workstation and PCs and what have you that

Akane-san had destroyed. This time she was all fired up, saying she was going to rebuild them completely out of nigh-invulnerable steel, but it seemed to me that this wasn't logically possible. Of course, what she got fired up about was her business, so I didn't say anything as to that.

As for Sonoyama Akane-san and Sakaki Shinya-san, Kunagisa looked up what had become of them on the Internet, most likely employing the skills of her old pal Chii-kun.

Akane-san had retired from the Seven Fools and begun a somewhat reclusive existence, but retained her prominence as a scholar. Shinya-san supposedly remained by her side. Considering the fact that no one had reported them to the police, this seemed plausible enough.

I entered the bookstore and bought what I wanted with a gift certificate, then stood and flipped through it for a while before leaving the store. Outside, an extremely gaudy—that is, expensive-looking—convertible was parked in front of the store. It was an eccentric sort of car that would have stood out even if this was a street in the middle of Kyoto.

The kind of upper-class car you see in magazines and the like. You know, with names like "Anaconda" or "Viper" or "Japanese Ratsnake." This probably wasn't a Japanese Ratsnake, but I was sure it was something in the snake family. But what were they doing riding in a car like this on a Japanese road? Or more important, what type of person rode in this ridiculous beast of a machine? I glanced over just in time to see the driver step out of the car. So as not to lose to the car, the driver herself was adorned in attire just as flashy.

She wore a generously revealing dress shirt inside a wine red suit that was bound to catch any passerby's attention,

wanted or not. On top of that she had a spring coat draped over her shoulders with nothing in the sleeves. Her shoulder-length hair was unnaturally shimmery, suggesting she had used any number of expensive hair products. Deep red sunglasses completely concealed her eyes. Her proportions were enough to make you wonder if she was a model, and she was tall to boot. She was a beautiful woman in the truest sense, but at the same time, she was the kind of beautiful woman you didn't want to approach. She looked like the type to have a lot of bad habits and lack universal appeal.

There was something offensive or disharmonious about her.

"Wow," I managed to eke out an utterance of wonderment.

So, good-looking cars *do* have good-looking drivers, I thought as I stared at her striding toward me. I cleared a path for her, thinking she wanted to stop in the bookstore, but I was wrong.

She came to a halt right in front of me. Then she stared at me over her sunglasses. Dominated by her overwhelming, abusive gaze, I found myself unable to move. Like a frog in a snake's gaze. And as such, I was unable to avoid it.

Without any warning, she brought her long leg upward, sinking her pump-adorned foot into my gut. I crumpled facedown to the pavement.

"Uguu…"

I felt like I was going to puke until there was nothing left in my stomach. But there was no time to scream. With no mercy nor reservation, she began stomping on my collapsed body with the heel part of her shoe, so it hurt quite a bit.

As is always the case when you're in trouble, there wasn't a single person in the vicinity. There was a bus stop nearby, but

the bus must have just left because nobody was there. Damn, must be my lucky day. Still, I hail no intention of making an ugly spectacle of myself by screaming for help. I rolled over in an attempt to somehow escape, but this ended in failure as soon as she seized me by the collar.

Just like that, she lifted me up.

"Huh… You really don't close those eyes," she said as if impressed. "Wow, it's pretty amazing. Haha. That's kinda cool. Okay, anyway… Hello."

"Hello."

"Come on, this isn't a funeral."

What the hell is she talking about? I wondered as she tightened her grip around my neck. She dragged me over to her convertible and tossed me into the passenger seat like a suitcase. She herself got into the driver's seat. She took off her shades and jammed her foot down on the accelerator. It seemed the car had been idling the whole time. She was a foe to the environment.

I thought as I rubbed my stomach and back.

Um, what was this? What was going on? Was this an abduction? Why me? Things were moving too fast for me to keep up. As much as I was a go-with-the-flow nineteen-year-old, I had scarcely been caught up in a torrential rapid like this before. Who was this woman?

"Um, who are you?"

"Hmm? My name? You just ask my name there, pal?"

She looked over at me. Her glare was even worse with the shades off. It was a terrifying gaze that seemed to pierce straight through my heart. What kind of life did one have to live to obtain a gaze like that?

"The name's Aikawa Jun."

Aikawa?

Aikawa, Aikawa…

The name rang a bell.

"Aikawa-san?"

"Jun is fine."

Her voice was brusque and surly. It seemed like such a waste, considering how beautiful she was, but maybe it suited her personality surprisingly well.

"Uh, Jun-san. Have we met before somewhere? I've got kind of a bad memory when it comes to acquaintances, but I don't feel like we've met before."

"First time."

"Thought so."

Even if we had only met one time, there was no forgetting a woman like this.

"What's that now? Eh? You mean Iria-san never told you?"

"Iria-san?" That name rang a hell, too. "Uh, Iria-san, Iria-san…"

Ah.

At last, the circuit in my brain connected.

Right. I remember.

"So then, you're the 'detective,' Aikawa-san?"

"I'm an independent contractor, to be precise," she said cynically. "Looks like you remembered."

"I didn't think you were a woman."

"Thanks. That's the best compliment there is."

She smacked me on the shoulder. It was more than a little surprising to learn that the Aikawa-san I had long been thinking was a man was, in fact, a woman—and such a beautiful one at that. But if you thought about it, except for the tagalongs like Shinya-san and me, Iria-san had mostly

brought relatively young women to the island. Looking at it that way, I probably should have realized Aikawa-san was a woman.

But Iria-san kept using ambiguous words like "hero."

"I was going to go all the way to your college," she said with a taint smile. "But then I spotted you standing there reading in that bookstore. It was a hell of a coincidence, so I thought I'd give you a whistle."

"You mean you were looking for me?"

"Yep. Thought I ought to see with my own eyes what kind of jerk was sneaking around stealing my jobs. Thanks to you, you chump, I never had my turn. How're you gonna make up for that?"

Her gaze pierced through me. It was like she had a direct grip on my heart. In my mind, the events that had occurred on that island were already over, so this development was completely beyond my expectations.

"Because of you I missed out on a job. And here they told me it was going to be a safe and easy case."

"Uh, I…" Not really understanding the situation, I decided to just go ahead and apologize. "I'm real sorry. Please forgive me."

"Haha!" Aikawa-san laughed. "No reason to apologize. In fact, I should be thanking you for making things easy."

Well, which was it? My unease was growing proportionally to my composure. What the hell situation had I gotten myself into? It was beyond comprehension. I had no idea what this Aikawa Jun character was trying to do.

"Um, where are we headed now?"

"Heaven. Or maybe Hell. I forgot."

"They're totally different."

"Yup, totally different. They're complete opposites. So we're bound to end up at one of them."

Where was she pulling this stuff from?

She went on driving without a care in the world. Maybe we really were headed for Hell. It seemed plausible enough. In a relatively unexpected turn, maybe my life was about to end. But then I guess the end is always unexpected.

"Well then, now that I've seen your face, that's one thing to mark off the to-do list. That leaves just one more."

Without a shred of reserve, Aikawa-san leaned that alluring face of hers right next to mine. I reflexively flinched at her whimsicalness. I wasn't very used to close contact with people other than Kunagisa.

"Um, one more? What is it?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd put one of your woes to rest," Aikawa-san said. "I'm an independent contractor. It's my job to solve people's pesky little problems. I lend a rescuing hand to those individuals with problems the likes of you could never handle. You chump."

"So that's what you mean by 'independent contractor'?"

That is to say, insofar as a detective is also someone who takes up contracts. "But what problem do I have?"

"On *rare* occasions I have been known to work for charity. Call me capricious. It'll be your reward for solving the last case so splendidly in my stead."

"Reward?"

"Don't be so tense. I may not look it, but I'm pretty much full of goodness."

Good people don't usually beat the hell out of others with their pumps on a first meeting.

"Now then, troubled one. You gonna take my hand?" she said, showing me the palm of her hand. "What's it gonna be? Your decision."

She was weird. Like, *crazy* weird. Her weirdness was in a league of its own. If you set that pack of eccentric crazies on our favorite deserted island as the average, Aikawa-san's weirdness was off the chart. Nevertheless, I grabbed her hand in a rare exhibition of assuredness.

This bizarre human being. How could I miss out on this?"

"Okay, pal."

She gave a wicked smile.

Maybe that was hasty of me, I thought.

"Um, before we get into anything, what is this 'woe' of mine you mentioned?"

"That's the one thing you ought to know way better than me. Way better. Can't you guess? *I've* come to see you. *Me.* So obviously it's about the incident at Wet Crow's Feather Island."

"The incident?" I said.

"Yup." Aikawa-san gave a small nod. "After that, I ended up paying a visit to the island anyway. I was originally planning to make it a vacation, so I was lucky the case had already been solved. I really mean that. Anyway, I talked to Iria, Hikari, Akari, and Rei. Incidentally, Teruko didn't say a word. She was silent as always. Even I've only heard her voice one time. Oh yeah, there was also one hell of a chef and some creepy fortune-teller. Ah, I don't want to think about her. What was up with that lady?!"

Suddenly furious, she slammed down on the steering wheel, practically breaking it. Evidently something had transpired with Maki-san on the island. What had that woman

done now? To be sure, you could tell just by looking that those two women were incompatible.

"Hmph," Aikawa-san grumbled before continuing her story.

"Anyway, I talked to them about the incident. No detail left out."

"So you think there's still something wrong?" I said. "I mean, what do you think personally, Aikawa-san?"

"That's Jun," she said in a suddenly low and grim voice. "Don't call me by my last name. Only my enemies do that."

"Do you still think there's something wrong, Jun-san?" I corrected myself and asked again.

"That's better," she smiled. Her moods changed like mad. I'd say they changed like the weather, but not even mountain weather changed this often.

"No no… I'm not the one feeling discontent, buddy. It's you, right? You solved the case. And you did it damn well. You did it so damn well nobody could even raise an objection. But you yourself still have doubts, don't you? Isn't something missing from your detective work?"

I was at a loss for words. Indifferent to this, she continued.

"Am I right? You solved the case in three days. It's only natural someone with brains like yours would still have doubts. Stop me if I'm wrong."

I couldn't say anything, and obviously it wasn't because she was out of line. It was because she was exactly right.

Exactly.

I… Kunagisa and I had made solving the case quickly a priority and shoved our own doubts into a dark corner. She had submitted a solution we personally didn't approve of.

Aikawa-san grinned.

"That feeling of discontent, those doubts, those things that seem less than agreeable to you, you chump—have you got them pinpointed?"

"Uh, well…"

"Why would Shinya kill Ibuki? Why would Shinya and Sonoyama be working in cahoots?" She flicked out her dark red tongue provokingly. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," I nodded reluctantly. "But that's their problem and, ultimately, no one else's, right? It has to do with their motives, and that's something beyond my grasp, so…"

"You're similar," Aikawa-san said. "Didn't you think so? Didn't Shinya tell you that himself? That you and he are 'similar.' Now why would this guy so much like you kill Ibuki Kanami, the one person irreplaceable to him, his version of that 'blue-haired girl' of yours?"

"It's probably just a misunderstanding. If it wasn't… Yeah, it's probably actually Akane-san who's 'irreplaceable' to Shinya-san."

"Are you satisfied with that?" Aikawa-san said with sarcasm. "No way, right? There ain't no *way* you're satisfied with that. I fully understand your sentiments."

"You're beating around the bush, aren't you? You're right, Aikawa-san, I'm not totally convinced. But…"

"That's Jun. I told you not to call me by my last name."

I got glared at again. It was frightening.

"Jun-san. You're right. I'm not totally convinced, but there are no other possibilities, so there's nothing I can do. When you've erased all the impossible possibilities, the remaining one is the truth, no matter how impossible it seems."

"That's a myth. So you mean you've been taking that ridiculous motive about eating people's brains seriously?"

Huh. I was at a loss for words. Aikawa-san snickered, reveling in my response.

"Now now now, get yourself together. Get yourself together, man.

"Do you really think there's a single idiot in this whole world dumb enough to believe if you eat the brain of a genius, you *become* a genius? It's not a bad thing if there is someone like that. People are free to think what they want. Everyone has the right to be feeble-minded. There's nothing wrong with that. We have freedom of thought, and freedom to be stupid. But would someone willing to use a corpse as a stepping stool, someone who has absolutely no respect for humans, really be thinking something like that? What do you think, bud?"

Well, indeed, that was a good point.

"Well, so what? What are you saying? I've always been confident in my ability to talk around subjects, but even I never go this far."

"That's because you're below me. I know something you don't know. Not to say you're incompetent or nothin'."

"You're just calling yourself competent?"

"I'm a jack-of-all-trades. If I wasn't, I couldn't do this kind of work," she boasted. She was almost frighteningly narcissistic.

"Well then, what do you think about it, Jun-san? You say you know it all, right? Please enlighten me."

"If you had just asked me that in the first place we could've cut right to the chase," she laughed. "Come on, bud. You noticed something unnatural, didn't you? I heard from Hikari. You noticed it, right? That painting you modeled for. *Why was there a watch painted in?*"

The watch?

I had completely forgotten about that.

"You didn't forget about that, did you?" she said. "Please don't tell me you forgot something that important."

"Of course not. How could I forget? But I thought it was just a painting mistake. Kanami-san relied on her memory to do the painting, so I thought it was just a memory issue."

"Not likely. It's essentially impossible for someone who claims her memory and perception are synonymous to make a blunder like that. Even supposing it was possible, don't you think there's some other reason, bud?"

"Okay, Ai… Jun-san. What do you think?"

"I don't know what other people think, but this is what I, Aikawa Jun, the world's most powerful contractor, have concluded: that picture wasn't painted by Kanami.

"Right. That's the only viable possibility. I mean, think about it the other way around. Let's say Ibuki painted it. If she painted it, it would be weird for there to be a watch, right? You weren't wearing a watch when you were sitting in front of her. So it probably wasn't painted by her."

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why?' You didn't actually see her painting it, right? Sure, maybe there are artists who always work alone, but I don't think Ibuki was one of them. I submit that Ibuki *could not* have done that painting."

"She 'couldn't' have? Kanami-san was an artist. She was famous. Surely she could've painted that."

"Plenty of artists have used fraudulent ghost painters," she said as if it was obvious. "Roughly fifty thousand. It wouldn't be odd if Ibuki was one of them. Not odd at all."

"So you think Kanami-san was a fraud?"

"Just think about it," Aikawa-san said. "You're not a painter?"

"Art is not my forte."

"So you were probably thinking something like 'this person is an artist all the way to the bone,' weren't you?"

Why did this woman know what people were thinking so damn accurately? She reminded me of Maki-san, but telling her this would anger her, so I remained silent.

"Don't compare me to that sketchy character."

Hey now.

She looked at me with a smirk. Don't clam up now. That was just a basic mind-reading trick. It's just a technique. With a little training, anyone can do it. But that aside, why did you think Ibuki was an artist?"

"Why? Well, I…" Cat had my tongue.

"It's not like you ever saw her paint anything, right? She only told you that, bud. You heard what she had to say, and then, based *solely* on that, you assumed she was an artist."

"I saw her paintings, too. Like the one of the cherry blossoms and stuff."

"But you didn't see her paint it, did you? Man, for someone who doesn't trust anyone, you sure are naive. It's like you don't trust anyone but you don't doubt them, either, or like you just withhold all conclusions indefinitely. You just took Ibuki's steaming pile of doo-doo for fact."

Doo-doo?

Did she say doo-doo? Was everything Kanami-san said nothing more than doo-doo? How was I supposed to kn—

"Oh, how were you supposed to know?" Aikawa-san beat me to the punch with my own line. "I wonder. I really wonder, buddy."

"If there's something you want to say, go for it."

"That's no way to ask for a favor."

"Please tell me."

She smiled. She was probably a little more childish than I had thought.

"Like the whole dress thing. When you modeled for her, you saw her wearing her dress, and what did you say? You said, 'You're going to paint like that?' right?"

I didn't know who she had heard that from (and only Maki-san was likely to know), but she was exactly right.

"A real artist never dirties her clothes with painting materials," Aikawa-san muttered. And then suddenly, "Like anybody like that really exists!" she yelled. "That's impossible! Even if she didn't get her clothes dirty, they'd be soaked in stench! It's not a matter of can and can't—people *don't* do that! Don't you notice these things, you moron?"

This was no act, she really seemed mad. I cowered in all seriousness. I thought I was about to get pounded. Suddenly I understood what Hikari-san had meant.

A "violent-tempered" person, huh?

"Anyway, when you're working with paint on canvas, you at least put on an apron. Even if you suck at art, that much is just common sense."

"Sure. But if that's the case, then…"

Then what did that mean? Kanami-san lied to me? No, not only that: she didn't know anything about art?

There was no way an artistic genius like Ibuki Kanami didn't know something as simple as that. Why? Because it was a fact that anybody with a little experience would realize…

Which meant…

"Yup, didn't know anything." Aikawa-san said with a slightly mocking tone. "Ibuki Kanami, the genius painter who couldn't paint. So, how will you solve this conundrum?"

"Well, uh, are you saying Kanami-san was a fraud then?"

"No. Think. And then realize, man. Ibuki didn't paint that picture. *But* Ibuki was the painter. *Thus*, by the law of syllogism, Ibuki was a fake. And *thus, of course,* she couldn't paint."

"A fake? But, a fake would… Why? Um, sorry. I'm totally confused." I clutched my head and thought. "So… in other words… an imposter Kanami-san was killed, and the real one wasn't?

"Yes. And the real Sonoyama Akane was killed."

Bam, another whack on the shoulder.

My brain ceased for a moment.

"Say what now? Akane-san?"

"Yeah. Sonoyama Akane. If you think about it, that clears up all the confusion, doesn't it? Why did Shinya kill Ibuki? Simple. He *didn't*. Why did Shinya go into cahoots with Sonoyama? Simple. He *didn't*. He was working with Ibuki. His irreplaceable Ibuki."

"So Kanami-san and Akane-san switched places? When? Hold on a second here. I spent three days on the same island with those two. I may have a bad memory, but I definitely would've known if they did a switch."

"What I'm saying is they switched *before* that, before they arrived at the island. I don't know how long those two were there, but it was before that."

"One has blond hair and blue eyes. The other is an intellectual-looking brunette. How in the hell do two people that different switch pla—"

"Hair can be dyed. You can put on color contacts. If you really want to look like someone else, it's simple. Especially when the person has such notable characteristics. Think about it."

"But— So those pictures—"

"It's like I've been tellin' ya, Sonoyama painted those. That day, I bet you were wearing a watch every time Sonoyama saw you. Thus, she's the one who painted you. Sonoyama… *as* Ibuki."

Sonoyama Akane *as* Ibuki Kanami. Come to think of it, where was Akane-san that morning? Was she in the atelier doing that cherry blossom picture? Did that mean Akane-san was the one painting me that night?

"Why would she—"

"To make everyone think she was Ibuki. Surely you would never have guessed the painter of that wasn't her. But you gotta admit, the whole watch mistake isn't like her."

"But… but, Iria-san… she's the one who invited them. She should've noticed right away, right?"

"How do you figure?"

"I mean, she must've at least seen pictures of them before."

"Pictures? Hey now. Hey now, man. Don't make me laugh here, buddy. You trying to make me laugh to death? Gimme a break here. Do you think people's faces look the same in real life as they do in photos? They leave different impressions, don't they? That's why wanted posters never work. Photos are still motion, reality moves. And the human eye chooses things arbitrarily. So naturally, when you compare the two, your mind favors reality."

She was right. Kanami-san herself had said the same thing. Suddenly I had the bizarre, *truly* bizarre feeling that *I* was the

real criminal and detective Aikawa-san here was hot on my tail.

"Why… why were they doing that?"

It was a prank. They switched places as a prank. Iria and Rei switched places, too, right? And they said it was a prank when you asked why, right? It's the same deal. I wonder who will notice. Will any of these so-called geniuses notice? Can this salon-running princess even tell the difference between us?

"That's at least what Sonoyama was thinking. Oh, the real one, I mean. So she, Shinya, and Ibuki got together and made these plans. Sonoyama was on board. She probably thought it would be funny. Scholars can be surprisingly willing to take part in such hedonistic pleasures. Especially those ER3 system goons. I'm sure you know that though. You were right smack in the middle of it."

That information from Chii-kun.

Ibuki Kanami and Sonoyama Akane had met in Chicago. They were acquaintances. It wasn't so impossible that they had planned such a thing. Kanami-san and Akane-san, who had gotten into countless arguments. But did this mean all that fighting was just something they planned so their switch wouldn't be obvious?

"So, what now?"

It goes like this. Ibuki and Sonoyama switched places. Ibuki became Sonoyama, Sonoyama became Ibuki. Then one of them was killed. The remaining one was Sonoyama. The switched Sonoyama.

"Who would've thought the woman once thought dead and then pronounced the murderer was actually someone else?"

"You mean it was Kanami-san posing as Akane-san?"

Akane-san had retired from the Seven Fools and begun a somewhat reclusive existence, but retained her prominence as a scholar. Shinya-san supposedly remained by her side.

"Considering the fact that no one had reported them to the police, this seems plausible enough," Aikawa-san said cynically.

"Are you saying *that's* the motive? But why would they do—"

"Ha!" Aikawa-san laughed as she narrowed her eyes at me. "That's an indescribably irrelevant question, my man. Man, I mean what would *you* say if I asked you why you're alive?

"Granted, a guy like you probably never thought about it. Have you ever wanted to become something? Haven't you ever wanted to become *someone*? It not, then you'll never understand Ibuki Kanami's feelings, no matter how many times I explain it. You, with your one established *style*, will never understand Ibuki Kanami, even if you travel to the four corners of the earth."

It was another virtual machine, I realized. A fake. There to trick the software.

"Does that mean you understand?"

"Nope. Other people's feelings are beyond my comprehension. But insofar as I have a working brain, I can at least imagine it. Yeah. All that sealed room stuff was just child's play to them. A diversion to keep people from learning their real objective. Even you got so distracted by all the sealed rooms and headlessness going on that you didn't even consider the possibility that they had switched, right?"

She was right.

But… but it was all too sudden.

"Hey, I can't just believe all this up front."

"That's right. For sure. It's so convoluted it's unbelievable. It's so convoluted, my words lose all meaning and even your personality isn't an issue. But one thing is clear. That woman discarded her former shell known as 'Ibuki' and succeeded in being reborn as 'Sonoyama.' She completely hijacked Sonoyama Akane's background."

"But won't she be found out?"

"Hell no. She'd probably been preparing for this for a long, long time. And don't you think the whole crazy idea to replace Sonoyama, to turn into her, came from the fact that their faces were similar to begin with?"

"To turn into her… So you're saying that's why she killed her? I mean I guess if you wanted to 'become' someone you'd also want to get rid of the real person, but still…"

To be sure, killing someone was the fastest way to get rid of them. And indeed, a deserted island beyond the influence of the police was the prime place to do it.

"If that's the case, then it should've just ended once Ibuki-san was killed. There was no need to make herself a victim and play dead."

"Get a hold of yourself, man. Geez, you're useless. If she did it like that, surely the question of why Ibuki was the only one killed would come up in no time. That's why she had to make it look like a serial killing. To hide her true intentions. She had to pose as a lust murderer going after everyone. That business about eating everyone's brains was probably added on as an afterthought; no doubt after she overheard you guys talking about it. But even if she had to kill someone, she probably couldn't bear to kill an innocent, so she pretended to be the victim herself instead. It's so clear-cut. Her calculations were so disgustingly sharp."

"Would a murderer really put so much planning into it?"

"Not all murderers are bloodthirsty maniacs. Just like not all wolves act the same. In reaching your objective, it's only natural to try and avoid danger as much as possible. The more incidents you cause, the more clues you give everyone. Am I wrong?"

Shinya-san had told me they were planning to kill everyone, and I believed him. After they had already killed two people, plus trying to kill Yayoi-san and myself, I never would have dreamed they knew anything of mercy.

However…

"But she tried to kill Yayoi-san."

"She didn't kill her." Aikawa-san cut off my objections in one fell swoop. "You made an assumption. You assumed 'Sonoyama Akane' would kill again after she went as far as recycling a corpse to hide herself. That's why you thought up that trap, using Sashirono as bait. But you were blind.

"Think about it. Then realize, man, you were dancing in the palm of Ibuki and Shinya's hand. Why would Shinya show you the sleeping bag? Why would Ibuki smash those computers in the morning when everyone clearly had an alibi?"

"Even that?"

Everything, even *that*, had been precalculated? They had predicted—no, *dictated*—our actions *that far*? The showdown in Yayoi-san's room, Kunagisa's anguish, all of it, *all* of it was in the palm of their hand? Had we all been nothing more than chess pieces subject to a strategy so devious there was no room to anticipate the next move? Thinking all the while we were so clever, we were really just being controlled.

And me with no basis to argue. But wasn't this all just a little too outrageous?

That vague sense of disconcertion I felt had now disappeared without a trace.

Aikawa-san stretched her right hand in front of me and, using those long, slender, white fingertips, began brushing my lips. Though I can't speak from experience, I thought it felt very much like being raped.

"Surely they had fallen in love with their target's work. Those paintings of Ibuki Kanami's, completely errorless, sans wristwatch and all. 'Now *that's* an artist,' they probably said. Haha, I'll bet they were originally planning to use *me* in their scheme. It didn't matter who they used. All they needed was someone to solve the mystery of the sealed rooms. As long as somebody figured out and exposed the truth that 'Sonoyama Akane' wasn't dead and then fingered her as the killer, Ibuki would be reborn and that was all that mattered."

And she would obtain a magnificent new identity.

Enjoying worldwide recognition as a comprehensive scholar.

"But, hey, even if she switched backgrounds and managed to turn into someone else, you still have to account for ability. 'Akane-san' is still to this day continuing her life as a well-rounded and outstanding scholar, even though she's retired from the Seven Fools. If those two really did switch places…"

"If, huh?" Aikawa-san said. "You're still talking about it in those terms, man? You sure don't know when to give up, do you?"

"Based on your detective work, Akane-san is really Kanami-san. But as far as Kunagisa has researched, she's still an active scholar."

"What's wrong with that? She can paint and study pictures, obviously she's capable of murder, and she's even capable of changing her identity entirely. Doesn't that essentially make her… a genius?"

"A genius?"

Why had Ibuki-san been summoned there? Was it not because she possessed extraordinary ability? She was the outsider of all outsiders. The penultimate. Transcendent of boundaries. Yes, that was absolutely…

"What was your definition of a genius again, buddy? Someone who's 'far away'? I heard from Iria. But you're wrong. It's a vector, basically… someone who devotes all of the time in his or her entire life to a single direction, to reach a given maximum potential. Human beings can do all sorts of stuff. But if, instead, they just focus on one skill, they can hone it to a ridiculous level. So much so that they seem 'distant,' as you might say."

A prominent function.

The direction of a vector.

A restrictive bias.

If you set that arrow in a single direction, instead of dispersing every which way… The power of focus. The savant syndrome. An inexhaustible motivation.

Pon pon, Aikawa-san smacked me on the shoulder.

"You did well, pal. But you're still an amateur. In baseball terms, you're a Little Leaguer, Mr. Pitcher. And just when you thought your opponent was a Little Leaguer, too, she turned out to be Domo-kun, figuratively speaking. You know him? Domo-kun. Before your time?" Aikawa-san said, getting a little friendly as she reeled my shoulders around. "It was just

a little premature, trying to end the story before the lead detective arrived, my man. And you were still too green."

"But… hang on a second here. Kanami-san was in a wheelchair."

"Any old schmo with working legs can sit in a wheelchair," she said cynically. "That's all there is to it, really. Even Ibuki Kanami said legs are just a decoration. Sure, they helped in kicking you around, but that's about it."

"Maybe that's the case for Akane-san. All she had to do was sit in a wheelchair. But Kanami-san was born with bad legs. She couldn't just jump around all over the place like—"

"Ibuki Kanami wanted to become Sonoyama Akane. She wanted to take over the identities of others. I wouldn't be surprised if that wasn't the first time Ibuki Kanami had switched places with someone."

Just how long had Shinya-san been serving Ibuki-san?

He had said it was a long time.

Since when, exactly?

And even now he remained by Akane-san's side.

How long would this go on? It was a virtual machine. Simulating the presence of multiple machines. Possessing no one style. Shunning the very concept.

"Did…"

What about Maki-san?

Had the famous, transcendental Himena Maki "known" even this fact? Was she just watching over—or blowing off—the situation with a goofy grin, despite knowing *everything*?

What was real? What was fake? *Who* was real? *Who* was fake?

"You can't ask questions," Aikawa-san giggled.

And at last, she pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"Tough break, kid. That's all I can say. And you did good. You did real good. How's that for a compliment? But you gotta try a little harder than that. If you've got lingering doubts, don't just blow them off. Settle your suspicions. Make the inconceivable conceivable. Don't write your thoughts off as just a pile of caca. Okay?"

"Okay."

"That's the A answer," she said, sticking out her dark red tongue.

"Well, I'm done bugging you. It's thanks to fellas like you that life's worth living. I really think so. But pal, you just need to cut down on the slacking a little bit. Human beings can do so much more, so get out there and do it, dammit."

Then, with a little tilt of her head:

"Well, that's it for today. See ya. Hey, get outta here, kid, you bother me."

She had a hell of a nerve tossing me into the car and then kicking me out. But naturally I couldn't muster the energy to contradict her, so I opened the door and stepped out.

Looking around to see where I was, I discovered we were right in front of Kunagisa's condominium. If there was ever a street in this world that didn't belong in Kyoto, it was this swanky residential one, Shirosaki. Even Aikawa-san's blood-red car didn't seem out of place here.

"Well, there you go…" I nodded, looking up toward the roof of the building. "This really *is* Heaven."

"Or Hell. Haha. This is where you were headed anyway, right?"

"How'd you know?"

Aikawa-san pointed at the bag in my hands from the bookstore. Come to think of it, I *was* on my way to deliver the

contents to Kunagisa. But this lady really figured that out just from this bag? She was like… like one of those famous books of yore. Like…

Like a detective.

"Ha," Aikawa-san laughed.

"Well, if our fates are linked, we shall meet again. Like there's any doubt about that."

She gave me a regular, noncynical smile and patted me once each on the head and shoulder. Then, pointing to the top floor of the condominium:

"Say hi to Kunagisa for me, too," she said.

Now that was a little suspicious. If there was anyone to commend in this case, Kunagisa deserved at least half the credit. So why had Aikawa-san only come to see me? Was she planning to see Kunagisa later?

"Aren't you going to see her?" I asked. "You came all this way. You might as well."

"Nah, that's okay. I saw her yesterday."

So I was the one on the back burner. The strength drained out from my shoulders.

"Ha," I sighed.

"Jun-san…"

My final question.

"Then… then what do you live for?"

"Like you have to ask. I'm the same as you, Mr. Ii," she said before stepping on the accelerator, and in another instant the red car had vanished from sight. I stood rigid in that spot for a while, unable to think. Unable to *want* to think.

Sigh…

"I feel as if I just ran into a street bandit."

It was a fairly accurate analogy. I felt an emptiness, like the luggage had been snatched off my back.

What was with that lady? Why did she start everything off by kicking the crap out of me? Was she just testing what she heard from Teruko-san? Or was it just payback?

Considering she had come all this way to meet me, that was probably it. Payback… for stealing her turn? Maybe that was it, or maybe she was just in "one of those moods," or maybe it was just as she had claimed, some kind of reward.

But maybe none of that mattered, either. At any rate, she didn't seem like a very nice person, and even if I was wrong about that, I wasn't so far wrong that it was uncorrectable.

Really…

Dammit.

What is this?

I'm surrounded by it here.

Really now.

"*Really* now, this is just a bunch of crappy nonsense."

Take Akagami Iria.

She brought together geniuses, deceived them, tricked them, did anything she wanted only for the sake of her own enjoyment, for the sake of the little world that was all her own.

Take the Chiga sisters.

All three of them seeming somewhat off, all three were the same, all the while being totally different. They were like the Sierpinski gasket, bearing complete self-similarity, the individual parts and their sum all uniform, all of them exactly the same while being completely different, an infinite abyss inside them impossible for anyone to view.

Take Himena Maki.

She who had the end of her life to look forward to in two years, she who knew the truth of all things, the truth of everything, and yet all she did was laze around yawning and purring like a kitty.

Take Aikawa Jun.

A big blur of red in the guise of a detective with a reputation as the world's best contractor, she had shown up on the island and solved the already solved case beyond any shred of doubt, no blade of grass left unchecked, all for no reason, and then vanished in a cloud of cynicism.

Take that woman whose name I didn't know, that woman who was no one. Surely, she was a genius.

"And then…"

And then.

And then, take Kunagisa.

Nothing really matters to me.

The world just does what it wants, and even if it didn't, that would have nothing to do with me, and even if it did have something to do with me, I wouldn't be interested. I've never wanted to become someone, and I've never felt like there was something I had to do. Sometimes I wonder if that's okay, but in the end, that doesn't really matter to me, either.

Somewhere along the way I just cooled off. No, that's not right. Probably, I dried out. Apathetic and indifferent. And that's why Kunagisa was moisture to me.

"Moisture, huh," I thought to myself.

Was Shinya-san the same way? Sakaki Shinya, stuck to that woman like a shadow. If so, he and I really were of the same breed, almost *too* much so.

"Hah…"

Sigh.

I didn't know who our worlds revolved around, but this world revolved around the sun. That's all there was to it, really, and it never amounted to anything more. And that goes for everyone.

The truth is always out of my reach.

And what's more, I never really care to reach for it.

Maybe that was the problem. This was probably what Aikawa-san meant by "slacking."

"Eh, that doesn't matter. I don't live to sit here and think about those kinds of things, and it's not like I'm trying to change the world or solve its mysteries. When I'm confronted with a puzzle, it's just annoying. If I can just keep on living like this tomorrow, that'll be enough."

Done talking to myself, I finally began to proceed on foot.

Any more thinking would just be a bother. I'd leave it to the people who wanted to do the thinking. No offense to Aikawa-san, but I wasn't looking to give some kind of worth to the world.

If anybody asked me why I was alive, I'd probably say just in case. That's about the only reason people have, and that goes for me, you, and everybody.

But…

But Kunagisa is different.

You know, if you were to put it in words.

"Whatever."

With Kunagisa's condo in plain sight, I thought about just going back home right then. I just wanted to throw off that haughty contractor's expectations, that's all. Even if we didn't

meet today, we could always meet tomorrow. We could meet up anytime we wanted. Nothing more to it.

Hmm, but…

My legs came to a halt once again. And I thought.

Five years ago, before meeting Kunagisa Tomo, I had nothing. But even reuniting now, even now that we were able to be together forever, I still had nothing.

I was empty. It was like… meaningless routine work. Just functioning, just living.

"Ah, dammit."

The contractor's cynical smile crossed my mind. I recalled the "prophet's" words. The lying sisters' words, too.

And then, the advice of that woman whose identity remained a mystery.

"You should just go."

Aggravating as it is, my life amounts to little more than just going with the flow. Letting myself be manipulated however people like, however they please, however they desire. Like a doll. Like a heartless machine. As half-assed as that may seem.

And so this ambiguous and mechanical scrawling of unanswered questions, accompanied by a certainty so under-cooked it's practically unnatural, comes to its almost predictably anticlimactic end, like a vague, crimson fairy tale.

I'm ready to go stand by Kunagisa's side, I thought.

AFTERWORD

Let's imagine for a moment that what you hold in your hand is an extraordinarily enthralling work of fiction of the highest order. As you know, that's not truly the case, but let's pretend. Now let's say you finish reading it, and in that very instant, you scream: "This writer is a genius!" I don't know if you would really scream that sort of thing, but let's say the writer of this book is off the subject of such praise. But such expressions sound not unlike excuses of the common man, as if claiming, "That person is a genius; in other words he's of a superior race totally separate from you and me, so of *course* he can do things we can't do" or something to that unseemly effect. "We're not to be looked down upon, we're simply looking up." And indeed that statement is correct, but I can't shake the feeling that something is off there. When it comes down to it, I don't think it's a very good thing to rely too much on this word *genius*. Moreover, not all geniuses are so evaluated. Or rather, *most* genius goes unnoticed. Meanwhile, those who achieve some sort of result are arbitrarily given the

label and people forget that it's really a complex issue based on factors such as effort and environment, none of which should be written off as "genius" if you ask me. Now, it really is a complex issue, so I won't get into the nitty-gritty of it, but when a person sets out to do something, you've got to consider natural-born talent, skill, and effort, not to mention luck and fate as well, so it seems to me that the term *genius* is putting it all too simply.

That said, you may find yourself a bit surprised by the number of times that word comes up in this book. You've got Ibuki Kanami, Sashirono Yayoi, Sonoyama Akane, Himena Maki, Kunagisa Tomo, and Aikawa Jun.

The narrator uses every possible opportunity to utter things like "because she was a genius" or "that's just what you'd expect from a genius." But as to whether any of these women are really true geniuses, well, that's a sketchy matter. From their personal standpoint, it's probably more like "if you just do whatever you want all the time, you'll be labeled a genius." Or no, I'm sure they'd have more to say about themselves, but if you asked Ibuki Kanami about it, she'd probably just say, "What do you mean 'genius'? *You're* just extra dumb." *Kubikiri Cycle* is an installment in the Zaregoto series that depicts geniuses gathered on an island, and yet there isn't a single genius there.

In having this book published, there were so many people looking after me that this author almost doesn't know whom to thank. If this book can be called anything good, it's thanks to the efforts of these people as well as the bookstores. Incidentally, this puts me in the nerve-racked mindset that if this book turned out to be bad, it's my fault alone, but at any rate I would like to extend my utmost special thanks to the

editor-in-chief Katsushi Ota for his goodwill and guidance, illustrator take-san, and Ryusui Seiryoin for decorating this book with undeserved endorsement.

NISIOISIN

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Born in 1981, the prolific **NISIOISIN** has already revolutionized the Japanese literary world with his fast-paced, pop culture-fueled novels. He debuted with *The Kubikiri Cycle* in 2002, beginning his seminal *Zaregoto* series, and *Bakemonogatari* was published under Kodansha's popular Kodansha Box imprint. 2007 saw the magnificent conclusion to his twelve-month consecutive serial novel, *Katanagatari*—for which **NISIOISIN** wrote one novel a month for an entire year—also for *Kodansha Box*. **NISIOISIN** has also created novels based on popular manga franchises: *xxxHOLiC: ANOTHERHOLiC*, based on the series by superstar artist collective CLAMP, and *Death Note Another Note: The Los Angeles BB Murder Cases*, based on Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata's blockbuster series.

Born in 1983, **take** made his debut with the gorgeous, ultramodern illustrations for **NISIOISIN**'s *Zaregoto* series. Just as that novel cemented **NISIOISIN**'s reputation as one of the leading lights of Japanese pop culture, **take**'s illustrations for these best-selling novels made him a star in his own right. His first-class character designs have captured readers' hearts, and he is now ranked as one of the top young illustrators in Japan. **take** loves cats and manga genius Osamu Tezuka.

If you enjoyed this book—and you did, didn't you?—please consider buying it to support its original creators.

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IT'S THE VACATION OF A LIFETIME, A TRIP TO A REMOTE ISLAND FILLED WITH GENIUSES—AND MURDER.

On Wet Crow's Feather Island, a tiny speck in the Sea of Japan, lives Akagami Iria, the exiled daughter of a powerful family. Born into great wealth, she was a princess of the highest pedigree—until she was cut off by the leader of the Akagami Foundation. For the last five years, she's lived on Feather Island with her maids. But she hasn't been alone. She has invited the best minds Japan has to offer to come and stay with her.

And so nineteen-year-old college student Ii-chan and his best friend, computer genius Kunagisa Tomo, find themselves as Iria's guests at her elaborate mansion. Surrounded by fascinating women—a chef, a fortune-teller, a scholar, and an artist, not to mention his own friend Tomo—Ii-chan is feeling a little overmatched intellectually. But the sudden discovery of a grisly murder sends the island into shock. And Ii-chan discovers that he does possess a bit of genius: the ability to discover what is real and what is fake . . . who is who they claim to be—and who is a killer.

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NISIOISIN

Illustrations by **take**

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BOOK 2: THE KUBISHIME ROMANTICIST

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BOOK TWO:

THE KUBISHIME ROMANTICIST

NISIOISIN

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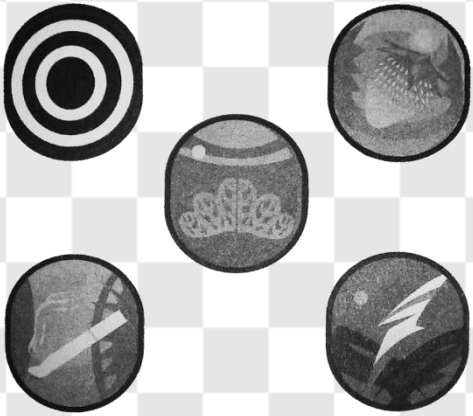


CONTENTS

1. THE SPOTTY-CRACKED MIRROR **3**
The Purple Mirror

2. YÛYA'S BANQUET **50**
Yûya's Link

3. THE AGE OF THE CLAIRVOYANT MAN **89**
The Murderer

4. RED VIOLENCE **141**
Stress Through Transgressions

5. CALLOUS **191**
Black and White

6. ABNORMAL ENDING **224**
That Wraps It Up

7. SINK AND DIE **252**
Cynicism

8. TRIAL **303**
Mentality

FINAL CHAPTER: **348**
A WORLD THAT CAN'T END

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Me (narrator): *The protagonist.*

Zerozaki Hitoshiki: *The murderer.*

Atemiya Muimi: *Classmate.*

Usami Akiharu: *Classmate.*

Emoto Tomoe: *Classmate.*

Aoii Mikoko: *Classmate.*

Asano Miiko: *Neighbor.*

Suzunashi Neon: *Asano Miiko's close friend.*

Sasa Sasaki: *Detective.*

Ikaruga Kazuhito: *Detective.*

Kunagisa Tomo: *????*

Aikawa Jun: *Most Powerful Entrepreneur in the World.*

Me (narrator)

The protagonist.

PROLOGUE

Dreams don't come true so easily.
Well, yeah. I mean, I can barely handle reality.
So, in other words, all wishes are nearly unattainable.
Well, yeah, but not all nearly unattainable things are wishes.

That's a single fragment of Zerozaki and me. A small sample of our conversation.

Let's suppose that it hadn't been a nonsensical babbler like me who was there. Imagine, instead, it was someone who harbors at least a *soupçon* of doubt about the world—the person would *still* have had a more or less similar experience in conversation with Zerozaki.

When you were in conversation with him, the exchange wasn't influenced by cheaply supplied empathy, or a pathetic desire to conform. Nor was it ever a product of the miraculously common synchronicity you see everywhere. Instead, a conversation with Zerozaki was a meditative realm within a mirror, that preceded meaning and conceptualization; It simply said, "This is the way it is."

There was no speck of realism, or any fragment of necessity, or any segment of a theoretical formula, or clarification or clownification, not a single puff of congruence and no such word as *allusion*, no solution nor illusion, not a drop of cogency, not a streak of the world order, and above all else, there was no romance.

The true comedy of it, however, was that in spite of all the things conversation with him wasn't, there was still *something*. It was the kind of comedy that bred sorrow, demanded compassion, and that had an even poignant air.

I think he was an irregularity to begin with. An untouchable. When I think about Zerozaki as someone "on the other side of the water"—as the person I saw on the other side when I saw my reflection on the surface of the water—that's the only way I can think to make any sense of him. And without being able to make any sense of him, there's absolutely no point in trying to put his existence into words.

But then again, regardless of what he may have been, was there even any meaning to Zerozaki in the first place? If he was like me and possessed no meaning whatsoever, then to look at Zerozaki from the outside and expect to come up with any kind of judgment was a misguided train of thought from the very beginning. How could one go about describing this sensation? Explaining this miraculous, entirely too familiar tale?

Being with Zerozaki was like looking into my own face and talking to myself.

Yeah.

It was an impossible, chance meeting to begin with.

Maybe it had all begin long ago, with our very first experience.

The very first word we ever heard.

Our root memories.

A past both easy to recall and easy to metaphorically describe.

We were traveling in the same direction from the same point.

From before the beginning of days.

Like reflections in a mirror.

That is to say, I think we were similar.

We were like two congruent figures, so similar that there was no need for a geometric proof. And we were both incredibly aware of this. From a subjective viewpoint, when we spoke to each other, I was, of course, myself; and Zerozaki, of course, Zerozaki.

Neither of us was anything more or less than just that, and we were well aware of this. And yet we identified with each other, were unified with each other. That was the paradox that we shared—a paradox that surpassed the limitations of language.

He was on the opposite side of the water's surface.

Now imagine an innocent young girl.

Imagine the first time she ever looked in the mirror. Surely, in her perfect innocence, she didn't know that the image before her was a mere reflection of the light. Instead, she *imagined*. She created something more: On the other side of the mirror, she saw an endless world, separated from her by a single pane. A perfect replica of her "here," yet existing in an

infinitely distant place. An enormous paradox of a world—living inside of her imagination.

It wasn't ignorance that allowed such a paradox to exist. It mattered little which world was the true one and which was false. If one side was real, then the other was fake, but if reality was in fact fake, then both sides had equal value, and equally lacked value.

That's what I think.

So did Zerozaki.

In a sense, my relationship with Zerozaki was very much like that. We realized we were the same, but we also understood that, at the same time, we were completely different.

"I might have once become like you, so I feel a certain affinity."

"I definitely could *not* have become like you. That's what I like about ya."

This was another fragment of us.

Truly nonsensical.

Ultimately.

I'm pretty sure we both despised ourselves. Likewise, we despised our own kind and scorned our own species. We both hated ourselves, resented ourselves, cursed ourselves so much that we were able to acknowledge each other with a bit of irony.

I think it was something special.

Wait, of course it was: I was the passive onlooker and he the homicidal monster. We existed at such extremes; it really did feel like there was a mirror between us.

But as soon as that dreamer of a girl reached out her graceful hand and placed a finger on that mirror, all she would feel was a void. Nothing but nothingness. The thing she had allowed to exist, someone else had not. Moreover, the thing she had allowed to exist didn't mean anything to anyone else. And this she finally realized.

For that girl, in that moment, without any exaggeration, a world had been destroyed.

And so begins the story of the downfall of a single world. A world that fell apart not due to the interference of an azure-haired Savant or a crimson-haired Mankind's Greatest, but simply because that's the way it was. When a fallacy bearing a justifiable paradox descends upon a human failure and me, a pile of damaged goods, everything goes back to zero.

So . . .

ZAREGOTO

BOOK TWO

Zerozaki Hitoshiki,
the murderer.

1

THE SPOTTY-CRACKED MIRROR

The Purple Mirror

My world is the coolest.

1

Rokumeikan Private University, located in Kinugasa, in Kita Ward of Kyoto, has a total of three dining halls. Of the three, the Zonshinkan Chika Dining Hall (lovingly abbreviated to "Zonchi") was thought to be the most lively. This was probably because it had an extensive menu, and it was right next door to the co-op bookstore.

That day, since I had no class during second period, I went straight to the Zonshinkan Chika after first period. I'd had no breakfast that morning—I'd accidentally overslept by a whole hour—so I thought I might grab an early lunch.

"Man, it's empty at this hour. Risky business," I mumbled to myself, doubting all the while that I was using the phrase "risky business" correctly. I picked up a tray.

Now, what to eat?

I'm no foodie, so usually I just eat whatever without much of a fuss. Be it spicy or sweet, I say bring it on. But lately things had been just a little different.

It was only a month ago that I'd spent a hell of a week in a place where I'd been served three gourmet meals a day.

Now, as an aftereffect, my tongue was still stuck in Snootyville. It had been a whole month since anything had made me say, "Wow, this is good." Every time I ate some-thing, it always felt like something was missing, like some key ingredient was lacking.

It wasn't enough of a problem to merit being *called* a problem, but I sure was sick of feeling that way. As far as solutions, I had already thought of two.

The first was fairly simple: Just eat tasty food.

"Can't hope for *that* to happen in a school dining hall."

But that first suggestion was impossible to follow. Not, anyway, without heading back to that strange, isolated little island. I won't say I was totally against the idea, but I certainly had my reservations.

"So *that's* no good."

Yes, I was talking to myself.

This left one other possible measure, and it was a strong-arm tactic. It was the "beat the child who doesn't listen" tactic. Most problems in the world are solved by either giving or taking.

I made my way to the *donburi* corner and placed an order.

"Excuse me. Large kimchee bowl, please. No rice."

The lunch lady gave me a quizzical expression and said, "That's just kimchee, son," but she dished it out all the same. As if it were nothing, she plopped it in front of me, displaying an admirable degree of professionalism.

A big, heaping, mountainous bowl of kimchee. I doubt there was a single tongue in this world tough enough to chow all that down and still preserve its sense of taste. I nodded

with satisfaction, placed the bowl on my tray, and settled the bill.

The dining hall was so empty that I could hardly decide where to sit. In another hour, the place would be filled up with students who had cut out of second period early. I was never a fan of crowds, so I considered myself under a time limit. I took a seat in the corner.

"Down the hatch," I muttered, and took the first bite. . . .

This. Was. Awful.

I really had to eat a whole bowl of this stuff? Wasn't this what was commonly known as suicidal behavior? What cruel fate had brought me to this pass? What had I done?

"Is this divine retribution?"

I guess they also say *reap what you sow*.

From then on, I wielded my chopsticks in silence. If I kept on talking to myself, people would start thinking I was a weirdo. And besides, it's poor table manners to talk while you're eating.

And then, just as I hit my limit—my entire head had gone numb from the tip of the tongue up, I didn't know what the hell I was doing, or, for that matter, who I was, or what the word *who* meant, and even what the word *meant* meant . . .

"Yo."

She sat in the chair across from me.

"Pull that tray back a little, will you?" she said. Then she pushed my tray toward me and placed her own tray in the newly opened space. Her tray was laden with a plate of spaghetti carbonara, some tuna-and-kelp salad, and a bonus fruit dessert for a grand total of three courses.

Oh, how bourgeois.

I looked to my right, then to my left. The dining hall was empty as ever. You could practically call it deserted. So why had she decided to eat her spaghetti directly across from me? Probably some kind of dare.

"Oh my God, what is that?! It's all kimchee!" she exclaimed at the shocking sight of my lunch. "Wow! You're eating a whole entire bowl of kimchee!"

• • •

She was wide-eyed, her hands up in the air like she was doing a banzai cheer. Maybe that *was* what she was doing, or maybe she was surrendering. There was also the possibility that she was just Muslim. Any of these was fine by me, but in reality, she was probably just surprised.

Her shoulder-length hair had a reddish tint and was done up in a sort of bob. Her clothes were nothing out of the ordinary. They were ultra-plain, following the style of so much of the Rokumeikan student body. All of a sudden, when she sat down, she seemed much shorter—but then I realized most of her height had come from her extra-tall London boots.

She had a young face, so I couldn't tell if she was my senior or a peer. Judging by her demeanor alone, it would have seemed plausible that she was my junior, except that being that I was a freshman, that was pretty much impossible.

"Hey. Y'know, if you don't respond, I'll get lonely and stuff." She stared at me with puppy-dog eyes.

"Right," I finally said. "*Who* are you?"

I was pretty sure this was our first encounter. But I'd learned one thing in the past month: This weird little pocket

of space known as a "university" had an unusually large number of people who were friendly and genuine. These strange people would strike up conversations with you like you had been their close friend for the past ten years—even if you had never seen them before in your life. For a guy like me who's bad at even *remembering* personal encounters, this made things difficult from time to time.

And surely this girl was another one of those types. Fearing the hassle of having to deal with a club invitation or, worse, some religious thing, I went ahead and posed the above question.

Doing so launched her into an over-the-top shocked pose. "Hwa?!" she said. "Oh my God! You mean you forgot? You've forgotten? You freaking forgot?! Ikkun, that's so cold!"

Huh.

Judging from her reaction, it seemed this was *not* our first encounter.

"Ohhh. I am shocked. But what are you gonna do, right? Yeah, nothing, I guess. You've just got a bad memory after all, right? Well, might as well introduce myself again." She flashed both hands at me and gave a full-faced grin. "I'm Aoii Mikoko!"

This might prove to be a painful encounter.

Whether it was our first encounter or not, this was, to be sure, my first impression of Aoii Mikoko.

2

Her story was simple. Mikoko-chan and I were classmates. Not only were we taking the same core subjects, but we were also in the same foreign-language class. We had met face-to-

face a number of times, and were in the same group for the class training camp before Golden Week. We had even been paired up before in English class.

"Man . . . from this conversation alone, I must seem like a total nut for not remembering you."

"I think you are a total nut!" She laughed lightheartedly. To be able to laugh so cheerfully after someone had entirely forgotten her existence took a special kind of vacuousness. I figured she was probably a pretty nice girl after all.

"Normally, I'd find it pretty disturbing that you forgot me like that. Or rather, I'd be pissed. But that's just how you are, right? Like, you don't forget the stuff that's *really* important, but you forget normal stuff," she said.

"Well, I can't argue with that."

She was exactly right. One time I had even forgotten if I was right- or left-handed, and found myself in quite a bind when I actually tried to sit down and have a meal. To top it all off, when all was said and done, I turned out to be ambidextrous.

"Okay, and what's happening with you?" I asked. "Why aren't you in class?"

"Class? Well, the thing about that is . . ."

For some reason she seemed abnormally happy. But I got the feeling that "abnormally happy" was her default setting. To be honest, even though I'd seen her before, I still could not remember what she was like normally. But either way, it was hard to be put off by this smiley-faced girl.

"I'm playing hooky."

"Freshmen really ought to go to class," I said.

"Aw, come on, it's boring. Totally boring. What was it again? Oh, yeah, my economics class. It's just a nonstop

stream of jargon. And it's like a math class. I'm a humanities person! And *you're* skipping class too!"

"I don't have a class right now."

"Really?"

"Yep. Fridays I only have a first period and a fifth period." She flung her hands wildly in the air again. "Doesn't that kind of suck? That's like six hours of boredom."

"Boredom isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"Hm, I thought boredom was practically the definition of 'a bad thing.' Different strokes, I guess." She began winding the spaghetti around her fork as she spoke. Unable to successfully get it all on the utensil, it soon became a matter of trial and error. I reckoned it would be awhile before the food actually reached her mouth. Before I knew it, she had put the fork down and switched to chopsticks. So much for stick-to-itiveness.

"Say . . ." I said.

"Hm? What-what?"

"There are tons of open seats."

"Yeah, for real. I think this place will fill up pretty soon, though," she said.

"But it's empty now, right?"

"You said it. Something wrong with that?"

"I wanna eat alone, so let's move along now, honey," I wanted to say. But then I saw her smile—a vulnerable smile that showed she couldn't possibly have imagined she was about to be completely rejected—even I had to take pity.

"Nah . . . it's nothing."

"Hm? You're a weird guy." She gave me the pouty lips. "Ah, but I guess if you weren't weird, you wouldn't be you. Weirdness is like your identity, right?"

I couldn't help but feel like I was being inadvertently insulted. But then again, it wasn't as bad as completely forgetting someone you had been regularly interacting with for a whole month. So I swept the notion aside and switched my focus back to the kimchee.

"Ikkun, you're a kimchee fan?"

"Nah, not particularly."

"But that's a *ton* of kimchee. Not even Koreans eat that much in one sitting."

"Well, I have my reasons," I said as I crammed some kimchee into my mouth. More than half of it still remained in my bowl. "Not very interesting ones, but still."

"Reasons?"

"Try to figure it out yourself first."

"Huh? Oh, right. . . okay." Mikoko-chan crossed her arms and began to contemplate my rationale. Of course, figuring what circumstances could possibly require my eating an entire bowl of kimchee wasn't exactly easy. After just a few moments of pondering, she let her arms drop back down apathetically. She really was quick to throw in the towel.

"Oh, yeah, by the way, I had a question for you. I thought this was a good opportunity to ask you. May I?"

"Uh, sure."

Wasn't the phrase "a good opportunity" usually used for something that came up by chance? As far as I knew, Mikoko-chan had come here and sat down in front of me of her own volition.

Or maybe that was beside the point.

She was wearing the same smile when she posed her question. "Ikkun, you know how you didn't come to school for a while in the beginning of April? Why was that?"

"Uh . . ." My chopsticks stopped moving. The bits of kimchee they held plopped back into the bowl. "Uh, well . . ."

I must have had a troubled look on my face, because Mikoko-chan was quick to start waving her hands around frantically and say, "Oh, if it's hard to talk about it, don't worry. I was just wondering, that's all. It's like, *Unsolved Mysteries Featuring Mikoko-chan*."

"No, it's not hard to talk about. It's a simple story, really. I was just on a vacation. For about a week."

"Vacation?" She blinked at me like a little forest animal. Her expressions were also easy to read. It made it easy for me to talk to her—she was a great listener.

"Vacation? Where'd you go?" she asked again.

"Out to some deserted island in the Sea of Japan, kind of by accident."

"By accident?"

"Yeah. A big accident. Anyway, that's how I got myself into this kimchee-eating situation."

She scratched her head, which was probably a natural response. But I am a fundamentally lazy person, so I couldn't be bothered to explain all the details. Or rather, just *how* the hell would I?

"Anyway, just a vacation. Nothing particularly deep."

"Huh. You don't say."

"What did you think it was?"

"Oh, nothing . . ." She blushed a bit. "I just thought maybe, uh, like you hurt yourself somehow and had an extended stay at the hospital or something."

How and why such an idea would occur to her was a mystery to me, but then again, for someone to suddenly take a week off just after entering a university, there weren't really

any other plausible explanations that came to mind. At the very least, it was a more likely explanation than "I was just on a vacation."

"I see. Sort of like a delayed graduation trip."

"Yeah, something like that. I couldn't get a reservation, so it ended up eating into April," I said with a shrug, but of course the real facts were totally different. The very idea that I had "graduated from school" was something I hadn't experienced since elementary school. I'd certainly never been on a "graduation trip." But all of the circumstances surrounding what had happened would have required a pointlessly long explanation, and it wasn't exactly the kind of thing I wanted to talk about at length anyway, so I just went with her interpretation.

"Hmm . . ." She gave a sort of half-convinced expression. "So did you go alone?"

"Yeah."

"Gotcha." And then, just like that, the cheerful smile was back. It was as if all confusion had been cleared. It was like she really didn't put on any façades. She was so straightforward with her emotions that I almost envied her.

Well . . .

Not really.

"So, Mikoko-chan . . . Why are you really here?"

"Huh?"

"You have something to say, I assume? I mean, considering you came and sat right here when there's a whole roomful of empty chairs."

"Huh." She narrowed her eyes and lowered her gaze a bit, down to my chest. "So I can't sit with you unless I've got something specific to say to you?"

“Huh?” This time it was my turn to scratch my head.

She continued talking in the meantime. "I mean . . . am I bothering you? I just saw you when I was walking by, so I thought maybe we could eat together.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

So she’d just wanted someone to eat with. I was the type who preferred doing personal things, like eating, alone, but there were plenty of people who viewed mealtime and talk time as one and the same. Surely Mikoko-chan was one of them. But having unexpectedly decided to skip class, she couldn’t find a friend to eat with, so she went ahead and struck up a conversation with the first acquaintance she happened to see—me.

“Well, if that’s all it is, it’s fine by me,” I assured her.

“Thanks. That’s a relief. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you had said no.”

“You don’t?”

“Hm? Yeah. Maybe something like this,” she said, pretending to hold the edges of her tray in both hands. Then she twisted her wrists in a sudden cracking motion. “Like that.”

“I see . . .” Even if she was just joking, I was a little relieved I had refrained from saying no. I wouldn’t have put such a reaction past her, in reality. Someone who expressed happiness so freely might express anger just as freely.

“Well, I guess I’m free anyway. As long as you just want to talk,” I said.

"Thanks.”

“So what are we talking about?”

“Oh, umm . . .”

As I prompted her onward, she began anxiously scraping her chopsticks together. She was probably trying to think of a topic.

I may have forgotten who she was, but surely in the past month it seemed like she'd at least managed to grasp the surface of my personality. So just what kind of topic would she broach with me? Me, who was so ignorant, and so lacking in common sense, that I used to think soccer was baseball played with your feet? I was strangely interested to find out, as if I were watching it happen to someone else.

She clapped her hands as if she had suddenly thought of something. "Don't you think the world's gone crazy?" she said.

"Huh? In what way?"

"I mean . . . er, you know, the prowler. Even *you* must know about it."

Even me.

Even *me*—the phrase was pretty enraging. Except that it happened that I had no idea who the hell "the prowler" was. "Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot! Of *course* I know!" An angry outburst like that would have been fairly justified, but "Shut up! How the hell am I supposed to know what that is, stupid?!" just didn't have the same ring of validity to it.

"Hm? What's wrong, Ikkun?" she asked.

"Ah, nothing. What's 'the prowler'?"

Obviously I wasn't looking for the dictionary definition, *one who prowls*. She gawked at me in amazement.

"You're kidding, right? Is this a joke? Ikkun, it's been all

over the news. There's no way you could have missed this if you live in Kyoto."

"There's no TV in my house, and I don't get the paper either."

"What about the Internet?"

"Oh, I don't have a computer. Don't really use the ones on campus much either."

"Oh my God, Ikkun is a caveman!" she said, sounding almost impressed in a way. "Is it some sort of ethical policy?"

"Maybe it is, in a sense. How do I put it . . . I don't like having possessions."

"Cooool! You're like an ancient philosopher! Wow!" She clapped her hands with joy. I seriously doubted I would have gotten the same reaction if she knew it was actually for a practical—and completely lame—reason: My room was just too small.

I mean, newspapers take up a lot of space.

"When you say 'if you live in Kyoto,' do you mean this 'prowler' thing is going on here?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's made a pretty big splash. 'Panic in the Old Capital!' Some places have even called off field trips."

"Wow . . . too bad for them."

"Six people have been murdered! And it's still going on right now! With no known suspects!" She had become all riled up, and there was a hint of excitement in her voice. "He stabs them with a knife and then flings their guts all around and stuff! Freaky, huh?"

". . ."

Let's set aside the fact that we were in the middle of eating. After all, I was partly responsible for the fact that the conversation had veered in this direction. But what did it say of this girl that she was able to discuss the murder of others with such absolute glee?

It's scary how detached people can become.

"Six people, huh? Is that a lot?"

"*Yeah* it's a lot! It's a hell of a lot!" She almost sounded boastful in a way, as if she were the one doing the killing. "Maybe not overseas, but serial killings are rare in Japan! It's become quite a sensation, you know."

"Huh. So that's why there are patrol cars circling around all over the place."

"Yeah. There are people from the mobile police force in Shinkyôgoku. Makes me think of the Gion Festival." She chuckled to herself for some reason.

"Wow, go figure. I didn't know anything about this."

As I nodded along with her explanation, somehow I knew Kunagisa would definitely get a kick out of this. Kunagisa, for those new to my story, is the short version of Kunagisa Tomo, one of my few friends. That is to say, my only friend. Kunagisa Tomo was a nineteen-year-old electronic and mechanical engineering professional shut-in of the mysterious variety, with blue hair and a passionate interest in collecting information on just these types of incidents.

Unlike me, she wasn't constantly in the dark about what was going on in the world. In fact, she was essentially an information-collecting expert, and she was probably already well aware of this prowler case without my having to say anything about it. In fact, she was probably already taking action.

"So when did it start?"

"Around the beginning of May, maybe? I think that's right. Why?"

"Oh, I was just asking."

I put the last piece of kimchee in my mouth. My tongue, or rather the entire inside of my mouth, was completely mangled. I would probably never take food for granted or say "this tastes bad" again. If you thought about it, the fact that a

single bowl of kimchee could so easily destroy all my principles didn't say much for my taste buds. Or maybe it was more of a stomach issue.

"Well, I'm done. See you again sometime." I put down my chopsticks and began to get up from my seat.

"Ah! Hold on! Hold on, will you?! Where are you going?!" Mikoko scrambled to stop me. "Wait a minute, Ikkun!"

"What do you mean, Where am I going'? I'm finished eating so I figured maybe I'd drop by the bookstore."

"I'm not done!" I took a look at her tray. Indeed, more than half of her food was left.

"But I am."

"Don't make me sad. Stay with me till I'm finished."

"Why should I have to do a pointless thing like that?" . . . is exactly the kind of thing I'm not tough enough to say. I'm more of the go-with-the-flow type.

"Okay. I'm free now anyway." I didn't have anything urgent to do, and it wasn't like I was full yet, either.

I figured I might as well eat some real food while I was there. "Wait a minute. I'm gonna go buy something."

I approached the register from the opposite direction (which was against the rules) and took a look at the menu on the wall, pondering whether I should order the beef bowl. Geez, it was more expensive than Yoshinoya. Maybe something else was the way to go.

"Kimchee again?" the lady at the counter interrupted lightheartedly as I was trying to decide.

"Yes."

Oops.

I had up and said it.

“No use crying over spilt milk.” Or wait, was this more of a “hindsight-is-always-twenty-twenty situation”?

A few dozen seconds later, I received another heaping bowl of kimchee (this time the lunch lady gave me a little extra) and sat back down in front of Mikoko-chan.

"What the hell? Am I supposed to be following along with something here?” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. So what were we talking about?”

“Hm? Uh, what was it? I forgot."

“Gotcha. Well, then you want to talk about class?”

She shook her head firmly.

“Why? There were some things I didn’t really get in first period today, so I was thinking maybe we could go over it together. It’s a required class for freshmen, so you must have gone, right? If you ask me, the professor’s inability to explain things properly is to blame, but what do you think?”

“What do *I* think?’ I think that there isn’t a boy alive who brings up something like this to a girl when there isn’t even a test coming up!”

I was only kidding, but she seemed seriously put off by it. “What’s the matter? You don’t like studying?”

“Nobody likes studying.”

“That sounds debatable to me. But if you hate studying, why did you go to college?”

“Ah, that’s a forbidden question. If you ask that, it’s all over. I mean . . . everyone’s like that, right?”

It seemed I had inadvertently touched a soft spot, and she suddenly seemed a bit melancholy. Come to think of it, it seemed to me that someone had once said Japanese universities weren’t a place for people who wanted to study, and that college was just a time to prepare for entering society.

"Heh, that's one way to put it."

"Do you like studying?" she said.

I shrugged.

Of course not.

In fact, I hated it.

"But it's not bad for killing time. Or as an escape from reality, rather."

"Usually studying *is* the reality." She gave a heavy sigh. Then, as if shifting her focus back to her meal, she picked at her salad for a while in silence.

Hmm. Was a plate of spaghetti, a large salad, and a dessert really a normal-size portion for a girl under the age of twenty? I didn't know anybody fit to use as a standard for comparison—everyone I knew was either incredibly finicky, ridiculously gluttonous, or always fasting or something—so I had no standards for judgment. But seeing as Mikoko-chan was neither too slim nor the opposite, perhaps it was, at the very least, an appropriate portion for her.

"Umm, it's hard to eat with you staring at me like that," she said.

"Oh, sorry."

"S'okay."

She resumed eating. When she was nearly done, she began looking my way in a sort of probing fashion. Really, she had been peeping up at me every so often the whole time, but now she had suddenly become obvious about it, making eyes at me like there was something she wanted to tell me.

And indeed, that proved to be an accurate speculation.

As if she had at last made up her mind about something, she placed her chopsticks down without finishing her dessert.

She gave a bit of a playful smile as she leaned her body forward, bringing her face close to mine.

"So, Ikkun," she said.

"Yeah . . . ?"

"The truth is, I may or may not have a favor to ask you."

"You don't."

"I do." She leaned back again in her seat. "Are you the kind of guy who might be free tomorrow?"

"If you define *free* as not having any plans, then I sup-pose I'm more apt to say yes than no."

"Yeah, *kind* of hard to follow you."

"That's just how I am," I responded as I chewed my kim-chee. "To put it more simply—I'm a free dude."

"Really? You're free? Oh, good!" She pressed her hands together in front of her chest with a look of true joy. To cause someone such teary-eyed happiness just by not having plans on a Saturday seemed a bit much.

More important, this didn't look good. I had the distinct feeling I was about to get dragged into something.

"I see, I see, so if I'm free, something good happens to you, huh? One hand washes the other. It's also kind of like the food chain. A magnificent circuit, if you will," I said.

She wasn't even listening. "Yeah. So anyway, if you're free tomorrow, I was hoping we could get together!"

Her hands still pressed together, she tilted them to the side a bit as if to emphasize her request. It was such an earnest, imploring pose that it almost felt like foul play. There was scarcely a male life-form alive that wouldn't have surrendered to it. They would *want* to surrender.

Nevertheless, I refused without mercy.

"No," I said.

"Wha?! Why?!" she shrieked. "You're free, right?"

"Well, yeah. But it's like I said, I don't dislike boredom. Sometimes people like to just spend the day doing nothing, right? Everyone feels like that sometimes. Everyone wants to escape the hustle and bustle of the world sometimes, to free themselves of the hassle of dealing with other people. Everybody has a right to time to contemplate their own lives. I just happen to have more."

"But-but-but! How can you just refuse without even hearing me out?! That's crazy! It's like a bunch of eighth graders forming a band, but they all end up playing bass!"

It was a pretty great analogy.

On close inspection, it was apparent that she was about to cry. That is to say tears were already brimming in the corners of her eyes. This was not a desirable situation.

I looked around. It was about time for the dining hall to start filling up, and students began trickling in, their numbers gradually increasing. At this point, I wanted to avoid standing out (by, say, making a relatively hot girl cry) as much as possible. But come on, who cries just from one little rejection?

"Okay, okay, just calm down. I'll hear you out. Come on, have some kimchee."

"Okay," she said, sniffling.

Doing as suggested, Mikoko-chan placed some kimchee in her mouth. "Uwa!" she peeped, and then the tears really started flowing. It seemed she wasn't much for surprises (which I kind of knew).

"Ahh, hot . . ." she cried out.

"Well, it is kimchee. It wouldn't be kimchee if it wasn't spicy."

They say there's also sugar-preserved kimchee, but I always went with spicy, so I had never seen it. I wouldn't mind if I never did, either.

"Ohh, you're terrible. You're so mean. . . . Now, what were we talking about?"

"That prowling killer?"

"No! We were talking about tomorrow!"

Bam! She slammed her hand on the table. It looked like she was seriously a little mad now. Maybe I had gone too far, I reflected.

"Umm, do you know Emoto-san?"

"Whether I know her or not, I don't remember her."

"She's in our core subject classes. Her hair is like this." She stuck her fists to the sides of her ears, but even with this striking pose, "Emoto-san" and her hairstyle remained firmly beyond the grasp of my imagination.

"She's a pretty noticeable girl. She's always wearing shiny things."

"Huh. Well, I don't really look at people much. What's her full name?"

"Emoto Tomoe. That's the *tomo* from *wisdom* and the *e* from *blessing*."

Interesting name. Sounded like it could do a headstand and start running around upside down. It felt like it rang a bell, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't want to just toss out some answer like, "Oh yeah, yeah, I know that chick. She's the one with the contact lenses, right?" There was always the chance that Mikoko-chan would throw it right back in my face, like, "I tricked you! There's nobody like that in our class! Ahahaha, looks like the pants are on the other leg now! Nya-nya-nya!"

And then the egg would be on my face, my fraudulence exposed. Not that Mikoko-chan would do something like that.

"Her nickname is Tomo-chan."

"That's not gonna work for me."

"Huh? Why not?"

"No reason. Just my own personal thing." I shook my head. "Sorry. I don't remember at all."

"Figures," she said, laughing. "But if you didn't remember me, I guess it goes without saying that you wouldn't remember her. If you did remember her, I'd be a little shocked."

I didn't quite follow her reasoning, but as long as my lack of memory made her avoid feeling terrible, I guessed it wasn't totally worthless. Something definitely seemed off with the logic there, though.

"Well, okay. How about Atemiya-san? Atemiya Muimi-san? I call her Muimi-chan."

"Another classmate?"

She nodded. "Then there's Usami Akiharu-kun. Akiharu-kun is a guy, so you must remember him, right?"

"My memory functions in a gender-neutral environment." "But you sure don't seem like a feminist."

She let out a big, unintentionally exaggerated sigh. It was like I had done something wrong. But it was my memory's fault, right?

"Anyway, so Tomo-chan, Muimi-chan, and Akiharu-kun. We're all going out tomorrow night for a little drinking." "Huh. What's the occasion?"

"It's Tomo-chan's birthday!" For some reason she seemed a tad boastful. It was hard to deny her adorableness as she sat there with her hands on her hips, chest stuck out. "May fourteenth! Happy twentieth!"

If this Tomo-chan was a classmate, that meant she was a freshman. Maybe she had entered college a year late. Or maybe she was a returnee like me. It didn't really matter.

"I'm only nineteen, by the way. My birthday's April twentieth."

"Huh," I said.

I didn't really care.

She continued. "Umm, so anyway, tomorrow's Tomo-chan's birthday, so we figured we'd throw a really light, casual kind of party."

"Huh. Seems like an awfully intimate group for a party."

"Yeah, well. We all like the rowdy atmosphere thing, but nobody wanted there to be a ton of people, so what are you gonna do?"

"Ah. Then four people is pretty appropriate, huh."

"Huh?" She looked surprised.

"A fifth person would throw off the balance."

"Huh? What?"

"Well, say hi to everyone for me. And happy birthday to you."

"It's not *my* birthday! Hey, wait, I mean don't just get up and leave! You don't know the other half of the story yet!"

"Well, they say knowing is only half the battle," I said.

"That's not what that means!"

She grabbed me by the sleeve as I started to leave and forced me to sit back down. But even if the conversation was only half-over, I could more or less tell what was coming next.

"Okay then. So now you're going to tell me to partake in this drinking party . . . or birthday party, rather. Right?"

"Gah! Wow, that's exactly right." She flung up her hands in surprise, but this time it reeked of phoniness. Maybe it

wasn't that she didn't put on any façades; she was just a lousy actress. "Amazing, it's like you've got ESP or something, Ikkun."

"Let's not go there. Not a good subject." I let out a light sigh. "How did all this come about? I don't even know these people, right?"

"Yeah you do. They're your classmates."

Ah, right.

Maybe I had amnesia. I was never good at remembering people, but lately it had gotten particularly bad. These three classmates aside, there wasn't a single person in all of Rokumeikan University whom I had a clear picture of.

But there was a more likely explanation: that it was simply the result of my apathy toward other human beings. It had nothing to do with my mind's functionality. It wasn't a defect. It wasn't that some essential part was missing, either.

It was just that I was, from the very start, a broken thing.

"Could it be that I've just forgotten, and that I'm actually good friends with these three people? Even I wouldn't forget something like who my friends are, I think."

Mikoko-chan's expression grew a little sad. "I don't think that's the case," she said. "You probably haven't spoken much. I mean, you've always got this narrow-eyed scowl as if you're thinking really hard about something or filled with contempt. Even now. It makes you kind of hard to approach. It's like you've got a wall in front of you. Or your AT field is fully operational. And in spite of all that, you always sit directly in the middle of the classroom."

I wanted her to leave me the hell alone. I wanted to tell her not to bother talking to me if that was how she felt. But I didn't.

I finished my kimchee. As it turned out, two bowls ended up being pretty excessive, and I felt dreadful fullness in my stomach. I probably wouldn't be having kimchee again for a long time.

"But you and I are friends, right?" she asked.

"Are we?"

"Yes!" She slammed both hands on the table again. It seemed she had a habit of hitting nearby things when she got emotional. I'd have to remember to stay out of range of those slender arms if I was going to make fun of her. That is to say, I'd have to stay out of range when I made fun of her. Maybe it was better to pick on her over the phone.

Er, I mean, why was I planning ways to harass her?

"And, so, naturally, I tell my friends about you sometimes, right?"

"I guess."

"And then my friends think, 'Man, for a guy who's always got such a crummy face, he seems kind of cool,' right?"

"I guess it's possible."

"So it's not so strange that they would want to try being friends with someone who seems kind of cool, even if he is a weirdo. Right?"

"Yeah, I guess we all have temptations."

"So that's what I'm saying," she said.

"What is?"

"That."

She peered up at me with eager, expectant eyes. I pretended I was drinking tea in order to escape her gaze. But a single cup of tea sure wasn't going to be enough to revive my paralyzed mouth.

"Huh. I understand," I said.

"You do?"

"It's a good opportunity and all, so I think I'll go spend the night at my parents' place tomorrow."

"Don't make plans' You didn't even go home during Golden Week!"

She slammed the table again. I was a little disturbed that she knew what I had been doing during Golden Week, but then again, maybe I had told her and forgotten.

"But you know . . . it's almost Mother's Day and stuff."

"That was last week! And besides, you're not the kind of guy who would go out of his way to show devotion to his parents!"

That was rather harsh. And even if she was right, did she believe that a seventeen-year-old guy who wouldn't even go out of his way for his parents would be any nicer to someone who was just a classmate? Maybe she was so worked up she didn't realize what she was saying anymore.

"Come on, I'm begging you. I already told them I'd bring you. I'll lose face."

"It seems like there's a misunderstanding here, so let me clear things up—I'm not the kind of guy you can have fun talking to. They say I've got about as much pep as a storm cloud."

"Wow, that's as disappointing as hearing about two budding young authors, only one's poison ivy and the other got eaten by tent caterpillars." She looked a little somber as she chewed her lip. "Come on, Ikkun. Do it as a favor to me. I know it's selfish of me, but hey, I'll even pay for drinks."

"Sorry, I'm not a drinker."

This was true.

"Why not?"

"I once drank a whole bottle of vodka in one go." I didn't dare tell her how things ended up after that, but at any rate, ever since then I had sworn off alcohol. I may not be such a smart guy, but I'm not so dumb that I don't learn from my experiences either.

"Wow, not even the Russians do that." She was truly surprised. "I see. . . . So you can't drink. Hm, now what?"

She immersed herself in thought once again. It seemed she had a firm understanding of what it was like for a non-drinker to show up at a drinking party. Perhaps she was a lightweight herself at least to some extent.

Nevertheless . . .

I wasn't so cold-blooded that I felt nothing for this girl sitting before me, looking so deeply troubled.

Dammit . . . I get dragged into things so easily. Going along with something out of pity was one thing. But getting dragged in just because the situation presented itself was totally lame.

"Okay, okay. As long as you're okay with me just sitting in the middle of the room scowling."

"Hmm, I guess that would be an awful bother for you, but you know, I think . . . Wait, you mean you'll go?" she said.

She shot her body forward. Maybe it's a rude analogy, but she was like a dog who had just had food tossed in front of it. A cat would have approached it with some caution, suspecting the possibility of a trap, but Mikoko-chan was completely unguarded. She may have physically resembled a cat, but she was definitely more like a dog in personality.

"Is it really okay? Will you really come?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm free anyway."

Even I was a little appalled by my own bluntness and wondered if I couldn't have put it a little more nicely. All the same, she shrieked with joy.

"Waaah! Thank you!" She smiled innocently.

I replied by downing the rest of my tea. At some point she had finished her dessert as well, so it was time I really should start to leave.

"Ah, wait a sec. Let me know your phone number. I'll call you."

"Hm? Ah . . ." I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. "Okay, it's . . . uh, I forgot."

"Figures. Okay, then I'll give you mine, so dial me."

I entered her number as told and sent it. A ringtone emerged from her little bag. David Bowie. She had surprisingly great taste.

"Okay, got it. Hey, Ikkun, your phone doesn't have a strap."

"Ah, yeah. I don't like that girly stuff."

"Are straps girly?"

"Well, I'm no expert or anything, but they're definitely not very manly."

"Mmm, guess not," she said with consternation.

"Well then," I said, stepping away from my seat with my tray. "See you tomorrow, Mikoko-chan."

"Yep! Don't you forget about me again!"

She gave me a big wave, to which I responded with a small one as I made my way out of the dining hall. After returning my tray and silverware, I headed straight to the co-op bookstore. Of course, being a university bookstore, its main selection consisted of academic texts, and its recreational reading selection was fairly limited. But on the plus side there was a

10 percent discount on everything, and for some reason (I wonder why) this particular bookstore had an unusually large selection of magazines, so it got fairly crowded.

I made my way to the novels section and picked one out.

Wait. *Huh?* Something had occurred to me.

"Wait a minute. Did Mikoko-chan call me 'Ikkun'?"

Now that I looked back on our encounter, that nickname she used seemed to stand out. I hadn't even noticed when she'd used the nickname—but I didn't think anyone had ever addressed me with such an overly familiar nickname in the past. I thought about it for a moment, but I couldn't remember. I had no specific memory of her calling me that before, but then again, I didn't remember her *not* calling me that, either. After all, I hardly have any memory of Mikoko-chan herself, much less a trivial thing like what name she called me.

"Eh, whatever."

Either way was fine by me. Satisfied with that notion, I began reading the novel inside the store.

Yup.

No big deal.

Hardly a life or death situation.

All was well with the world.

Even if Heaven was empty.

3

What is a fatal wound?

Cutting off someone's head.

Yeah, obviously that's one.

Crushing someone's heart.

Again, obvious.

Destroying someone's brain.

Naturally.

Stopping their breathing.

That's another good method. Pretty final, too.

But when I say "fatal wound," I'm not referring to these trivial sorts of things.

I'm thinking of something else. A fatal wound is an impact so intense, so devastating, that you fall into a state where you're no longer a human—even though you are. You're no longer able to lead a life even though you're living. It means being ground to bits after falling victim to a relative paradox created by reason itself.

That is a fatal wound.

In other words, failure.

The key here is the fact that even after a profound failure, we go on.

The world is brutally tepid.

It's so kind that it's cruel. It's a devil's Heaven.

To put it plainly, you don't die by making a big mistake.

Or maybe I should say you *can't* die.

Yeah, you don't die.

You just suffer.

You simply suffer in agony.

And you go on. Forever, wherever.

Meaninglessly, you just go on.

Life isn't a video game, not because there's no reset button, but because there's no Game Over. Even though it was "over" long ago, tomorrow shows up anyway. Even when night falls, morning comes again after it. When winter ends, spring rolls in. Life is wonderful.

It's an absolute paradox—even though you've taken a fatal blow, you can't die. It's like asking what a person sees when he looks backward while traveling faster than the speed of light. An unthinkable question.

Even though the potential to be you has long since been cut off, you go on. You do it all over, again and again. You redo your life again and again.

But it's like making a million crappy copies, and each time you make one, your "self" gets a little bit shoddier.

And eventually you get to thinking . . .

Am I really me, or . . .

. . . did I become something else long ago?

Have I devolved?

Just as the central figure in an incident can't all of a sudden become just a disinterested bystander, you can't become your own spectator.

And *that*, my friends, is what's truly fatal.

"In other words, it's like mind over matter . . ." I muttered. As I pondered these fruitless ponderings, I was trying the new McDonald's burger. The five hundred twenty-five yen value combo.

The kimchee must have worked, because my sense of taste had returned to normal. A McDonald's hamburger tasted pretty luscious again. After all, as a Japanese person, there was no way I could have gone on with my life if unable to enjoy McDonald's.

The time was 7:30 in the evening.

The place: Shijôkawara-machi, Shinkyôgoku Street.

After fifth period had ended, I decided I wanted to see those mobile police Mikoko-chan was talking about for

myself, and my feet had taken me this far in an effort to kill time.

Next to the tray with the hamburger on it was a single magazine. What they call a "weekly infozine." I had bought it at the co-op, and on the cover it said, "Feature Story: Jack the Ripper Resurrected in the Devil's City!"

"Pretty tasteless."

The ridiculously apocalyptic feel of the magazine was actually the second reason I had bought it. The first was that it featured a big story on the "prowler" incidents Mikoko-chan had been telling me about.

I shoved two fries in my mouth, added a straw as well, and sucked down some cola. I started flipping through the weekly. The first page was set with an all too vivid picture of a corpse as the background, and in big, Gothic letters, it read: "The Homicidal Monster Who Shook Kyoto!"

Ominous indeed.

"So they let you show photos like this . . ." I muttered as I flipped through the pages. I had already scanned through the details of the articles, so I at least knew something about the incidents now, if not everything.

The media had dubbed the crime spree the "Kyoto Prowler Serial Killings." Not the most imaginative name in the world, but then again, maybe a case like this didn't need one. Still, the word *prowler* hardly seemed to be an accurate description of the criminal. I always thought of as a prowler as a sort of stalker, someone who stalks people on the street and causes them harm. But in this case the culprit was luring the victims into desolate areas, killing them with a sharp blade, and finally dismembering the corpses. It seemed like maybe "serial killer"

was a better description than prowler. And you could definitely make an analogy with the Jack the Ripper murders.

"Six people now, huh? Not bad," I muttered as I stuffed the magazine back into my bag.

Yeah, six people. Just as Mikoko-chan had said, six people in less than two weeks' time was quite a death toll. It was probably unprecedented. By the third murder, the police force had been dispatched all over the region for surveillance. Even the riot police had been dispatched, and yet the murders went on, as if the killer were laughing at them.

The victims had no apparent connections. They were young and old, male and female: The killer showed no mercy to anyone. The police (and everyone else, for that matter) had deemed these incidents merely a series of acts of random violence.

Therefore the sixth victim probably wouldn't be the last. The killings would go on. As long as this monster remained on the loose—or until he decided to stop of his own volition—there would be more murders. Perhaps even tonight. Perhaps even right now.

"It's all nonsense in the end, huh?" I stared out at Shinkyôgoku Street from the entrance of McDonald's.

It was the same scenery as always. Fewer tourists and students on field trips, but it was still pretty crowded—a lot of kids with dyed hair were milling around. I suppose you could say that this was when they came out to mark their territory.

Nobody, absolutely nobody walking along this street right now was seriously considering the notion that *they* could be the next victim.

Of course, everyone was still being a little cautious. Some were visibly unsettled by the mobile police units scattered

here and there. “What a mess,” they might think, but that about covers it. At most, they would go home a little earlier than usual.

But deep in their hearts, everyone believed they would be going home.

That’s how it is with these things. There are very few people who can accept as a hard reality the possibility that they might be the next to die.

It was true that the probability of becoming the next victim was negligibly low: “Those victims must’ve had been really unlucky.” A terrible thought, but what else could people think?

Anyway . . . perhaps I should go ahead and mingle in with this unguarded crowd? With that in mind, I got up from my seat only to feel my phone vibrating in my right pocket. I wasn’t familiar with the number on the display. But I didn’t want to just ignore it. I went ahead and pushed send.

“Ciao! Mikoko-chan here!”

Hyper from the get-go. It was easy to imagine her giving me the thumbs-up on the other end, even though I guess she probably wasn’t *actually* doing that. But without even knowing who she was talking to, she was so bubbly and friendly. What would she have done if this was the wrong number? A small fire ignited in my inquiring mind.

“Eh? Hey, it’s Mikoko-chan. What’s wrong?”

I didn’t reply.

"Uhh . . . This is Ikkun, right?”

Again, I was silent.

“Hellooo? This is Ikkun, right?”

I persisted in not replying.

“Did I mess up? Huh? I messed up!”

I kept up the silent treatment.

"Gahhh! It's like getting all prepped for the next radio calisthenics session—you know, that exercise show broadcast over the radio—only to have them go 'We're outta time, so just do the chicken dance'! I'm sorry, I dialed the wrong number!"

At that, I finally said something: "No, this is right. What's up?"

"Uwa!" she shrieked in surprise when I spoke. "Huh? Wha?" she sputtered, confused. Eventually, she let out a sigh, so I figured she had calmed down a bit. I also figured that it was only a matter of seconds before her relief turned to anger.

"For crying out loud! It's the phone! You have to say *something*! I'll freak out if you don't! Ikkun, you jerk! You snake! You . . . you monster!"

I didn't think I'd done anything *that* bad.

"Sorry, sorry, I was just kidding around."

I hadn't meant to stay quiet for so long, but I also had never expected she'd provide such a hilarious response either. Before I knew it, my timing had been thrown off.

"God . . . It's fine, I guess. Since it's you and all."

She let out a moan. It was hard not to feel a little sorry for her. "Umm," she started again, back to her normal self. "This is a business call! Regarding tomorrow's business!"

"You know, you don't have to yell. It's quiet here."

"Hm? Where are you now?" she asked.

"Ah, uh, I'm at home. At the boarding lodge."

"Oh. I'm still at school. I had to talk to Inokawa-sensei about something, so I just got out of the research room. Isn't that place incredible?! Books everywhere!"

Inokawa-sensei led the general-education class. A slightly eccentric assistant professor, he was popular enough with his students if you were willing to set aside the fact that he was way too strict about punctuality. (If you weren't in your seat by the time the bell *started* ringing—even if you were in the classroom and were in the act of sitting down while it was ringing—he marked you absent).

"Umm, right, so about tomorrow. Will you be home tomorrow?"

"Yeah, that's right. Are we meeting somewhere?" I asked. "Uh-uh. If we set a meeting place, we might miss each other, right? That's no good, so I'll come meet you at your boarding lodge. I bought a scooter and I kinda wanna take it for a spin. So, let's say four o'clock. Can I go to your place at four?"

"Yeah, it's fine, but . . . you know where the boarding lodge is?"

"Huh? Oh, no problem there." She seemed flustered. "I mean, because we made that address list when classes first started, so I know it."

"Is just the address enough?"

"I know Kyoto well, so we're a-okay. You're at Senbon Nakadachiuri, right?"

"Huh?" I asked. There was something suspicious about the way she was acting, but if she said she knew it, I figured there was no problem.

"Fine by me," I replied.

"Okay. That settles that, then. Hmm, I'd like to talk more since I went to the trouble of calling, but I've got to go to driving school from here. I made an appointment, and if I don't go now I'll be late."

"Huh. You're going to driving school."

"Yep. How about you? Got a license?"

"I do. Just for automatic, though."

If it wasn't such a big hassle to get a license, I could actually drive *anything*, but that was a secret.

"I see," she said. "I'm going for a manual. I'm reaching that age where I want my own set of wheels, you know? My dad said he'll get me a car once I get my license. Yup. Anyway, see ya tomorrow. B-b-b-byeee!"

She giggled and hung up. I stared at the phone for a while before putting it back in my pants pocket.

Right. We did have plans tomorrow, didn't we? It hadn't *completely* slipped my mind, but it was close enough. At this rate, I might forget again by tomorrow. Maybe it would have been best to write "Plans with Mikoko-chan tomorrow" on the palm of my hand, like an unusually dim-witted elementary school student.

Oh, but if she was coming to meet *me* at my house, it didn't really matter if I remembered or not, I thought. I was just going to be there all day anyway. I returned my pen case to my bag.

This time I really did actually walk out of the McDonald's. It was already almost eight o'clock, and the shops outside were preparing to close. Suddenly something occurred to me.

"Ah, that's right. It's a birthday thing."

In that case, I should probably take the opportunity to buy a present while I was out and about. It was only common sense—not that I ever thought of myself as someone with a lot of common sense.

Then again, I'd been sort of half-forced into going. Maybe I didn't have to go out of my way to be a good guy or anything. As I thought it over, I peeped into a nearby souvenir shop.

Emoto Tomoe. Now, what kind of a character was *she*? I didn't have a single memory of her. Once I actually saw her face, I might remember her. But no matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't remember a single thing about her. Which meant she probably wasn't a particularly eccentric or remarkable person. Maybe she was a little more subdued than most. The kind of person who reads a book before the start of class instead of messing with her cell phone.

Wait . . . but hadn't Mikoko-chan said she was a striking girl who always wore shiny things? Huh. I had no idea after all. Not even a vague image.

Then there were those other two: Atemiya Muimi-chan and Usami Akiharu-kun, right? I tried to recall them as well, but with no success.

"Eh, I guess if they're Mikoko-chan's friends, they can't be all that weird."

"Tell me what company thou keepst, and I'll tell thee what thou art." Cervantes said it, but surely you could've switched it around and it would still make sense. Nothing to worry about too much.

As my mind wandered, I picked up a box of snacks from a display. They were *yatsuhashi* cinnamon cookies folded into triangles and stuffed with red bean paste. A wholly conventional Japanese snack. Thirty pieces, one thousand two hundred yen.

"Hm . . ."

Kyoto and *yatsuhashi*—a confection made from rice flour, cinnamon, and sugar—were synonymous with each other. If there were no *yatsuhashi*, it wasn't Kyoto, which meant that if there were *yatsuhashi*, it *was*. Compared to *yatsuhashi*, Kiyomizu Temple, the Daimonji Fire Festival, and the Big

Three festivals didn't even matter. Shrines and Buddhist temples were irrelevant. If you didn't eat *yatsuhashi*, you didn't know 80% of Kyoto.

Okay, then, I thought.

And so it was settled that Tomo-chan would receive snack food for her birthday. I didn't want to burden her with something nondisposable, and I figured it would be the perfect thing to eat while drinking. Or wait, *did* sweet stuff go with alcohol? I didn't drink, so I didn't know. At any rate, it wasn't like they would be *inedible*.

And then my back shivered.

It felt as though liquid nitrogen had been poured into my spinal cord. As if my entire body had been frozen to absolute zero and the heat of the outside air was about to scorch me. Only a basic level of brain functionality remained. And then I felt an intense pressure crushing me. If I couldn't maintain my composure, surely I would be pulverized.

But I didn't look back. I just tried to collect myself as coolly as possible, and thrust the box of *yatsuhashi* at the store clerk. The clerk had a brown earring, a brown ponytail, and a smile that wasn't very professional.

"Welcome, now." The clerk wrapped up the treats for me, which I accepted as I fished for the exact change. "Please come again there, now," the clerk said cheerfully with a little head bob. Surely it was this kind of heartfelt service that captured the hearts of tourists, I thought, a little irrelevantly, as I left the store and began on my way to Shijô Street.

And then I felt it. A gaze so intense it couldn't be ignored once detected, a gaze so ferocious there was no way *not* to be aware of it. No, this was more than a gaze.

This was the intent to murder.

It was a 100 percent pure murderous desire. Nothing—not one of a million emotions; not animosity, aggression, or a sense of mischief—diluted the purity of this desire. My entire body ached with a terrible feeling. This feeling was long past the point of unpleasant or unsettling.

I walked.

The feeling followed me.

I walked some more.

The feeling still followed.

"In other words, I'm being followed," I muttered to myself.

Since when? *From* where?

I had no idea.

It was so blatant that I didn't even need to look back.

It was so blatant that I didn't even need to sense it.

That meant that whoever it was had surely noticed that I had noticed. The fact that they continued to tail me anyway was the most blatant thing of all.

"This ain't good," I sighed as I weaved my way through the crowd. It was strange. I really thought I'd left all danger behind me . . . back on that island on the other side of the sea. Being tracked all the way to this country, to this city, no less, seemed unthinkable, much less being *killed*. I had already employed Kunagisa's skills to confirm that.

In which case . . .

This was a random act.

The first thing that came to mind was the feature story from the magazine in my bag.

The slasher.

"Aw, hell no," I said to myself. What cruel fate had brought me to *this* pass? If I were to put it like Mikoko-chan, I might have said something like, "It's like forming a second Onyanko Club, but everyone's a backup dancer." On second

thought, I have no idea what that means. I guess you shouldn't try to be something you're not, I thought. Clearly I was panicking.

But even supposing the person one thousand feet behind me right now was the famous prowler, or even supposing it was just your run-of-the-mill psycho killer, or even supposing that it was someone with a grudge against me . . .

Something was off. This just didn't make sense. It was unfathomable and absurd.

What I felt was uneasiness. Yes, like the uneasiness you feel when you notice that reflection in the mirror is looking back at you, that kind of absolutely mistaken textbook explanation. I had now confirmed that that red line that's usually in front was, suddenly, behind.

"More nonsense?" Of course this was an illusion.

What mattered right now was that someone was following me. This much was certain. That and, sometime soon, I would be killed. This much was also certain. With these two essentially definite facts in mind right now, I had no leeway to be distracted by any other sensations. Ultimately, my options were limited.

Give, or take.

"Ahhh, this is becoming a freaking hassle," I muttered.

I made my way from Shinkyôgoku Street onto Shijô Street. On the other side of a cluster of cabs was a long line of cars. Shijô Street was extremely congested at this time of day, to the point that it was actually faster to walk than to drive. In a town like Kyoto, which had so many traffic lights it wasn't even funny, a bicycle was by far the number one most effective way to get around.

Number two, incidentally, was by foot. Maybe number three was a boogie board.

I had come to school by bus, so number two was my only option. I debated for only an instant about which way to go before heading east.

After a pause at a red light, I crossed Kawara-machi Street. If I kept straight on this road, it would take me to Yasaka Shrine. From there, if I broke south, I would reach Kiyomizu Temple. It was a textbook route for the Kyoto temple sightseer. But I was no sightseer, and I had no intention of going as far as Yasaka Shrine.

I was on pins and needles. I felt that high-pressure gaze edging ever closer. And if it ever caught up to me, that pressure would erupt into plain, simple violence.

"Ah . . . this is gonna be close." May already and here I was in a cold sweat. Just how long had it been since I had been this nervous? Surely not since I'd left that odd little island. Yet at the same time, what I felt now was somehow distinctly different from what I had felt back then.

I am nervous, therefore I am at peace.

I became aware that, for me in this nervous state, failure was something wholly improbable.

"Phew . . ."

And so I arrived at Kamo River. Instead of crossing the big Shijô Bridge, I made my way down the staircase beside it and emerged on the riverbank. Whenever the sun came out, countless young couples would start crowding the riverbank. In my personal opinion, this riverbank, lined with perfectly spaced out boy-girl pairs, was one of the top three must-see attractions of Kyoto. When the moon was out, the riverbank offered itself as an after-bender hangout for drunks. After drinking the night away, they could come here to sleep it off.

The drunks ranged from college students all the way up to salarymen.

The drunks and lovers had one thing in common: They were both complete nuisances who went around shoving their happiness in other people's faces. But there was no time to wax philosophical about. No matter what I thought about the drunks and young lovers, only one thing mattered right now. It happened to be that one brief moment of the day when the riverbank was empty. The lovers had already gone home, and the drunks were still getting drunk.

In other words, it was a perfect situation.

And being underneath a bridge made it even better, right?

I entered the shadow of the bridge as soon as I had descended to the riverbank. The sounds of passing cars rushed overhead. The chatter of people crossing the bridge. It was one hell of a ruckus. But it wasn't enough to cover this guy's footsteps.

Shuffle.

The sound of scraping grit.

I muttered something and turned around.

He made an incoherent noise as he faced me.

My feelings at that point were probably pure and simple confusion. Ordinary, everyday confusion and nothing more.

There was a mirror in front of me.

Or so I thought.

His height was a bit under five feet, and he was long-limbed and slender as a flower stem. He wore tiger-striped shorts; nonskid rustic boots; a red, long-sleeved, hooded parka; and a black tactical vest. Both hands were clad with gloves, but they obviously weren't for something as cowardly as covering his fingerprints, as they were fingerless gloves. It was my

guess that they served a much more sinister purpose—to stop the knife from slipping on sweat.

His long hair was tied up in the back and buzzed on the sides as if he were a dancer. His right ear had a triple piercing, and two straps that looked like they belonged on a cell phone dangled from his left ear. His stylish sunglasses rendered his expression unreadable, but the sinister-looking, obviously real tattoo running down the right side of his face communicated this person's eccentricity loud and clear.

He was unlike me in almost every conceivable way. Our similarities ended with age and gender.

And yet I felt like I was looking into a mirror.

So naturally I was confused.

And my new friend appeared to be just as confused.

Still, he made the first move. He inserted his right hand into a pocket of the vest, and an instant later he was brandishing a small, five-centimeter-wide knife. He made not a single wasted motion. It was as if he had surpassed the limits of the merely human. Light and sound seemed distorted around him.

Even supposing I had been observing all this from the point of view of an uninvolved bystander, even knowing that this was a murderer, his technique was so perfect that I could've only described it as *artful*.

There was no escaping it. There was no accepting it.

But I managed to dodge the knife by pulling my upper body back. Of course, normally this would be impossible. I wouldn't say I'm any less athletic than average, but I'm certainly no Mary Lou Retton either. I had neither the quick eye nor agile body needed to elude a plausible contender for the title of the world's fastest knife fighter.

However, supposing a dump truck was coming straight at you at a hundred miles an hour, but you became aware of this when it was a few miles away, I think we can all agree that dodging it would be a simple task.

Likewise, I'd been anticipating my assailant's slash attack. It was so obvious that it was coming that it was if I had been expecting it for the past five years.

I groped wildly for my bag, then swung it around, hoping to smash him in the face. But with no more than a simple motion of the neck, he managed to dodge my attack as if he had been expecting it for *ten* years.

Because I had strained to dodge his attack, I tumbled backward. Of course, I didn't do anything as foolish as try to roll back to my feet. Even a single arm wasted on such a maneuver would surely have created a prime opportunity for the killer. Just as I feared, he wheeled back from his initial miss and came straight for my carotid artery. Not good. There was no way to dodge from this position. I guess I could have theoretically performed a stupid-looking roll and dodge this one attack. But the next moment, or the moment after that, regardless of how pathetically I scrambled around on the ground, he would plunge that knife into my spine. I could imagine it so clearly that I felt like a certain clairvoyant I once knew.

In which case, dodging was beside the point. The key was simply *taking* it. I swung my right elbow up at the knife.

My opponent twisted his wrist, altering the direction of his swing. Consequently, the excess momentum from my elbow had me swinging at nothing. This left my entire front side, including all of my organs, not least notable of which were the heart and lungs, completely exposed to the enemy.

Behind the sunglasses, his eyes seemed to smile ever so faintly.

With another twist of the knife, he aimed it directly at my heart.

A moment's pause.

And then the tactical knife swung down at double speed. So strong was his will to destroy human life that it made his body move at speeds that couldn't be detected by the human eye.

He left me not even time enough to gasp. That's right: I didn't even have time to gasp.

But I had known this one had been coming before I'd even been born.

_____!

_____!

The knife tore through a single layer of my clothing and stopped. My left index and middle fingers had stopped it—by pushing up my assailant's sunglasses.

A stalemate.

He had my heart and I had his eyes. If you put the two on a scale, their weights obviously differed, but this was no matter to be weighed on a scale. For my opponent, tearing through my flesh and bone to demolish my heart was simpler than taking candy from a baby. But it would leave just enough time for me to pulverize his eyeballs.

The opposite was also true.

I could sacrifice my own heart to destroy his eyeballs, and he could sacrifice his eyes to obliterate my heart. Hence, a stalemate.

We stayed that way for as long as five hours, or maybe it was five seconds, and then: "This is a masterpiece," he said, tossing his knife aside.

"It's nonsense is what it is." I retracted my fingers.

He backed away from me, and I rose to my feet slowly, shaking the grit off my clothes and slowly straightening out my posture.

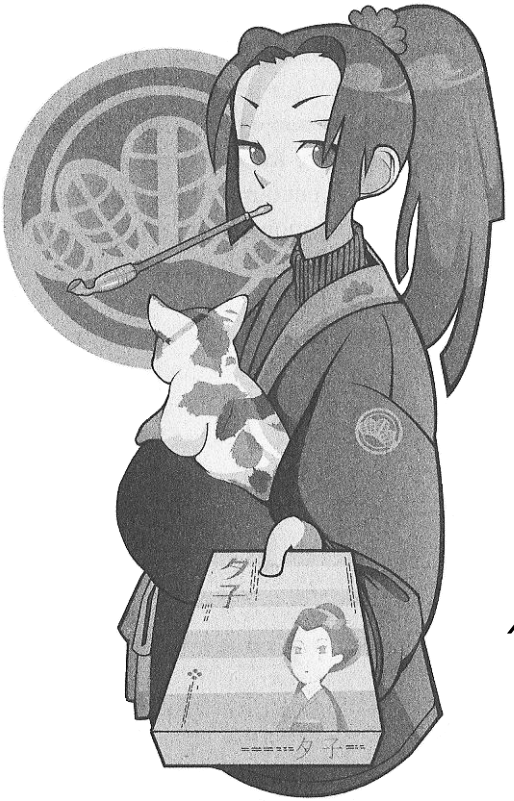
Our fight had been a farce—but it had gone so harmoniously, it was as if it had all been predestined. I felt overcome by an incredible faintness.

"I'm Zerozaki," my opponent said as he straightened his crooked glasses. "Zerozaki Hitoshiki. So who the hell are you, Mr. Doppelgänger?"

The question left a sour taste in my mouth. It was like seeing myself asking someone else for my own name.

And that—*that* was the first encounter between the passive onlooker and the homicidal monster.

Strangely enough, it was Friday the thirteenth.



Asano Miiko,

neighbor.

2

YÛYA'S BANQUET

Yûya's Link

Misfortune and misery are underplayed.
Give me more despair. Give me more darkness.
Give me wholehearted depravity.

1

The thirteenth of any given month, by the way, is more likely to fall on a Friday than any other day. Friday the thirteenth occurs once a year at least, and three or four times a year on average. But for a guy like me who wasn't Christian—I don't even understand the difference between Catholic and Protestant—Friday the thirteenth meant little more than that the next day was Saturday the fourteenth.

Now, then. The next day was Saturday, May fourteenth. I awoke inside my one-room Senbon Nakadachiuri apartment. I looked at my clock to discover that it was about ten until four p.m.

"Seriously?"

I was a bit . . . that is, *fairly*—nay, *insanely*—surprised. This was a whole new oversleeping record for me. How many years had it been since the last time I slept until the afternoon? And it wasn't only the afternoon—the p.m. was a third over already. This would probably remain as a stain on my memory for the rest of eternity.

"But then again, I want to bed at nine in the morning, so it's only natural."

Finally shaking away the sleepiness, I returned to my sense and rose from my bed.

The room had four straw mats of floor space and a naked lightbulb. This little pocket of space was unbelievably classic, and so full of anachronisms that it made you wonder if it had been around since the olden days when Kyoto was still our capital. Naturally, the rent was deathly low. Deathly to the landlord, that is.

I folded up my futon and stuck it on the closet. There was no toilet or bath, but there was a washstand of sorts, so I used it to wash my face, then got dressed. My wardrobe wasn't exactly jam-packed with options, so all of this took less than five minutes.

I opened the window and let in the outside air. Kyoto is an incredible place, in that once you've passed Golden Week, you've already entered summer. It's as if life is still being run according to the old Chinese calendar—or as if fall and spring don't even exist.

Then there came a knock at my door. This apartment wasn't equipped with such modern amenities as telephone intercoms. It was exactly four o'clock. Mikoko-chan was certainly a punctual one. I was just a little bit dazzled by this. People who were as anal about time as Inokawa-sensei were just annoying, but I figured that if you really wanted to refer to yourself as a human being, you had to be at least as punctual as an analog clock. In that sense, Mikoko-chan passed as a human.

"Yo, I'm coming."

I unbolted the lock (now *that's* what I call radically retro) and opened the door. But to my surprise, it wasn't Mikoko-chan.

"Sorry."

It was Asano Miiko-san, my neighbor. She was twenty-two years old, making her my senior, and she was a seasonal worker. There was something strangely Japanesey about her style, and even right now she was dressed in classic Japanese summer casual wear. It was black cloth, with the word Carnage printed on the back of her top in white letters, and she had a distinctly samurai-esque ponytail. At first she seemed unapproachable, but after you talked to her for a bit, it quickly became clear that she was a pretty decent human being. Maybe a little on the mysterious side, but that just added to her charm.

"Miiko-san . . . right? Good morning."

"Yeah. Were you sleeping?"

"Yeah, I actually overslept a bit, so . . ."

"If you slept this late, I don't think it still qualifies as 'a bit,' " she said drably. With her subdued demeanor, it was often hard to guess what she was thinking. It wasn't that she was completely expressionless. Instead, her default expression was a glare, with changes so subtle that she might as well have been expressionless.

"Oh, please come in. As usual, there's not much to see, though," I said without a hint of false modesty. I stepped aside to make way, but she shook her head.

"Nah, I just came to give you this." She passed me a flat box. It was wrapped in paper with the word *Snacks* written in big letters.

". . . ."

"They're *yatsuhashi*. They're a Kyoto favorite."

"I know them, but—"

"They're yours. They're good, you know. Well, see ya . . . I've got to get to work."

She spun around, flashing the word *Carnage* at me. The fact that she had offered no explanation as to why she had just given me a box of *yatsuhashi* was hardly unexpected. She was a woman of few words, and when you thought about how much effort you would have to exert just to fish an answer out of her, it was easy to justify leaving things unexplained. And so I send her off with a simple "Thanks very much, I'll definitely enjoy them," and nothing more.

She stopped in her tracks.

"Sounded like you got back just this morning," she said without turning around. "So, what's the story?"

". . ." Damn these thin-walled apartments. Actually I suppose they do have their perks.

"Oh, I was just hanging out with a friend all night. Nothing shady. Nothing exciting either."

"A friend, huh? Wouldn't happen to have been that colorful blue-haired girl who came by around February, would it?"

"Actually, Kunagisa's an extreme shut-in. This was someone else. A guy."

She nodded with a look of complete and utter disinterest, but I wondered if she would've perked up a little if I had said "I was schmoozing with that killer everyone's been talking about under the big Shijô Bridge." Then again, Miiko-san being the way she was, it was entirely possible that she wouldn't have given me more than a "huh," even if she knew I wasn't joking.

She nodded, seemingly satisfied, and proceeded on her way down the planked hallway. She was headed to her part-time job. When I first discovered those weren't just her indoor clothes, even I couldn't help but vocalize my surprise.

I shut the door and returned to the middle of the room.

But why did it have to be *yatsuhashi*? Come to think of it, these were the exact same *yatsuhashi* I had picked up the previous day for Tomo-chan's birthday. It was a terrifying coincidence, but there it was.

"Well, whatever."

I stacked the two boxes and stuck them in the corner of the room.

Looking at the clock, I discovered is was several minutes past four.

Thirty minutes later, it was past 4:30.

"Well, duh," I said aloud and lay down on the floor.

Well now. Wasn't Mikoko-chan coming to pick me up at four? Of this I was certain. I may forget things, but I never misremember them. This meant Mikoko-chan had either gotten in an accident, gotten lost, or was just a sloppy person. But no matter which it was, there was nothing I could do right now.

"Time for some Eight Queens?"

Of course, there was nothing as extravagant as a chessboard in my room, so I'd just have to play it in my mind. The rules to Eight Queens were simple, and concise—just place eight queens on a chessboard so that none of them can capture any other. It's one of those "brain exercise" routines. I'd played the game quite a few times, so I basically knew the solution. But with my poor memory, I always forgot the exact arrangement, so I was able to enjoy the game every single time

I played it. Okay, not that it was really all that enjoyable. But it was a good way to kill some time.

I started strong, but the trouble set in around the fourth queen. The game was starting to lose its consistency. Queens just don't get along with other queens. There should never be more than one party in power. Moreover, if I allowed my thoughts to wander like this, I'd lose track of where I had put all the pieces up until now, and I'd have to start all over.

The thrill of sectioning off your mind like this was indescribable. You could say it was something like the feeling of walking on a balance beam, only the more pieces you placed down—that is, the closer you got to a final solution—the harder it became. In that sense, it was very much like a game, and great in that sense. In the case of failure, there was no one but yourself on whom to vent your anger, and herein lay the real thrill.

And just as I was trying to find the place for the seventh queen, there came a knock at my door and a cry of "Ikkun!"

The chessboard went flying. Queens everywhere.

For an instant, my heart, not to mention my thoughts, stopped.

I approached the door and swung it open. This time, it really was Mikoko-chan. She wore a pink camisole with a red miniskirt, exposing a healthy and refreshing amount of skin.

"Morning!" she said with a wave. Then came the full-faced grin. "Ikkun, *guten morgen*!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"*Morgen . . . gen . . . gen . . .* It's like the Doppler effect or something." She was as spastic and smiley as I'd come to expect her to be. Her eyes drifted away from me off into space. "Umm, I was just wondering, and I know this isn't the kind of thing you would do, but . . . Are you mad or resentful or hate-filled or cursing my name or anything? Actually, cursing my name does seem kinda like something you'd do."

". . ."

"Come on, let's communicate! Hey! Don't be so quiet! When you get all quiet I feel like I'm about to have something terrible done to me!"

"Your palm," I said.

"Hm?"

"Hold the palm of your hand in front of your face like this."

"Okay . . ."

She did as told.

Smack! I smooshed her hand into her own face.

"Gwah!" she shrieked in unfeminine fashion. Satisfied for the time being, I went back inside to fetch my bag. Now where had I put those *yatsuhashi*?

"Uwa! You're terrible!" she said as she came into my room for some reason. "You're being violent with me just for being a *little bit* late? That's abuse, you know. It's like forming a jury-based judicial system, only all the jurors are O. J. Simpson!"

Apparently forty minutes late was only "a little bit late" in Mikoko-chan's mind. Without waiting for an invitation, she came into the middle of my room and took a seat on the floor. *Plop*. She scanned her surroundings with a look of true curiosity. "Oooooo," she sighed in awe. "Wow, there's nothing here. Amazing!"

"You know, that kind of compliment isn't particularly flattering."

"You really don't have a TV! You're like one of those struggling students from the good ol' days. I bet you study by the light of fireflies! Does anyone else live in this apartment?"

"Uh, well, there's one swordsman freeloader, one hermit, a fifteen-year-old and thirteen-year-old brother and sister currently running away from home, and then there's me, so that's four rooms and five people. Up until recently there was an aspiring singer here too, but she went to Tokyo to launch her major-label debut."

"Wow, so this place is kind of prosperous. Kind of a surprise. So I guess that means there's an open room here? Hmm. It does have a certain ambience, huh? Maybe I should move in!"

What could she have possibly seen in this apartment, in this room, that would've given her such an idea? "Better not," I said, giving her the appropriate advice. "Well, let's get going, huh?"

"Ah, not yet. It's still too early," she blurted out.

"But won't it be bad if we don't leave soon? We're already pushing forty minutes here."

"No, we just have to be there by six. Tomo-chan's apartment isn't far from here, so even if we leave at five thirty we'll have plenty of time to get there."

"Oh really?"

"Really," she said with an index finger thrust skyward. It was hard to deny the adorableness of her grandiose gesticulations, but it didn't seem like the thing I needed to go out of my way to mention, so I didn't. I didn't want to get her all excited.

"Then why did you say four o'clock?"

"Huh? Oh, that. Well, you know. Ehh, I'm not so great with time. It was just in case, just in case."

"You mean there was a chance you might have been an hour and a half late?"

Just thinking about it made me feel like blood might shoot out of my ears.

"Huh?" she said, peeping at my face to catch my expression. "What's the matter?" she asked cheerfully.

"Nothing. I'm not thinking about anything. I'm definitely not thinking about how you should maybe consider the feelings of the person waiting for you to arrive. Or how you should stick to the time that *you* designated. Or how you should at least call if you're going to be late. Or how you should take better care of chessboards."

"Chessboards?" She scratched her head.

Naturally she wasn't supposed to understand that.

I found the *yatsuhashi* lying in the corner of the room and cut the seal on one of the boxes. I placed it in front of her.

"Can I eat 'em?"

"Sure."

I stood up and made my way over to the sink. I thought to boil some water for team, but I didn't have a kettle. I thought of using a hot pot, but I had no burner in any case. So I just poured her a cup of tap water and placed it in front of her.

Looking thoroughly baffled, she glanced at the liquid thrust before her, but then pretended not to see it and didn't bother touching it.

She chowed down enthusiastically on the *yatsuhashi*. "Asking this might be one of those things and all, but are you poor, by any chance?"

"No, I'm not particularly strapped for funds."

Living in an apartment like this, I had no evidence to support this statement, but it was the truth. At the very least, I had enough money saved up to pay for your years of college without lifting a single finger. Technically it wasn't money I had earned personally, but it was in my possession.

"I guess you're sort of an economist then, huh? Or is it a philosopher?"

"I'm just bad at spending money. Sort of the opposite of a shopaholic."

I helped myself to some *yatsuhashi* as I spoke. She gave me a halfhearted nod of comprehension.

As she knelt on the straw-matted floor of my room, I stared at her from top to bottom. Huh. Not that I was thinking anything in particular, but there was something very awkward about having her sitting here in the middle of my room. I don't know if you would call it unnatural or risqué, but something about it felt incredibly iffy.

I stood up.

"Huh? Where ya going? We've still got an extra forty minutes."

"Forty minutes is just a 'little bit,' right?"

"Ahh! Ikkun, that's the kind of thing a big jerko would say!" she said, recoiling overzealously. "You don't have to hold it against me forever!"

"I'm just joking. Let's go get a light lunch somewhere. It's no fun just picking at each other in this empty room."

I hoisted my bag over my shoulder and headed toward the door.

"Aww, that's not true," she mumbled as she followed me.

2

Tomo-chan resided in a students-only apartment complex near Nishiôji Maruta-machi. Just looking at that steel-reinforced, concrete exterior, I could imagine the difference in rent from my own place. Five times as much, or even ten if you got swindled.

Mikoko-chan must have been there before, because she entered the main lobby with an air of confidence. She pushed the room number on the intercom and pressed the call button.

"Yellooo! It's Mikoko-cakes."

"Yo-yo. C'mon up."

As the somewhat drowsy voice emerged from the intercom, the firmly locked glass door slid open. An autolock security system. Actually, maybe that's too extravagant a term. Whether that lock was there or not made little difference to anyone trying to break in.

"Come on, hurry. Hurry hurry hurry hurry." Mikoko-chan passed through the door and beckoned for me to hurry along. "Sixth floor, sixth floor! We gotta hurry!"

"It's not like the sixth floor is going to get away."

"Yeah, but it won't come down to greet us either."

"That's true . . ."

I followed along as told.

"The sixth floor is the very top one. Tomo-chan lives in the corner apartment, and there's a pretty nice view, as views go."

"Mm, nice view, eh?"

That was one thing I never hoped to see where I was living. If you opened the window in my place, you got trees.

We called down the elevator and got in.

"I wonder if Akiharu-kun's here yet. Muimi-chan is pretty much a given, but . . ."

Mikoko-chan was incredibly excited. Seeing her carefree expression, even I couldn't help but think about how nice it must be to have friends. Whether or not it worked for me, it must've been very nice for her.

We got off at the sixth floor. Mikoko-chan raced down the hallway and stopped in front of the very last door. "Over here, over here!" she shouted and beckoned. It made me want to ask if she was just completely oblivious to the looks people gave her.

She pushed in the doorbell. *Ding-dong*. The door opened, and a girl revealed herself.

"Welcome," the girl—most likely Tomo-chan—said drowsily, a cigarette hanging from her lips. She was entirely different than I had expected.

"So, Mikoko. On time for a change, eh?" She wore her long brown hair in a *sauvage*—with her hangs long and the rest cut at wildly varying lengths—and her fashion sense was impeccable: Her light jacket and jeans combo was very stylish. She was probably a little taller than me, and was so sickly thin that if she said she had only one day to live, I probably would have believed her. It was the perfect match for her slightly crooked smile.

"Howdy, Muimi-chan!" Mikoko-chan greeted. "Haro haro!"

It seemed this wasn't Tomo-chan after all, but Muimi-chan. "Oops," she said, finally noticing my presence. Without a hint of shyness, she gave me a hard study from top to bottom. "Maybe this is our first time talking, 'Ikkun,' " she said with a smirk.

"Yeah," I said apathetically. "Hey."

It seemed my apathy had struck a chord with her. She let out an exaggerated laugh. It was boisterous, and not very feminine.

"Well how 'bout that. You *are* an interesting guy. I think we'll get along."

"Really." It was more of a sigh than a response. Not the kind of thing that warranted such judgment. It was just about as enthusiastic as my greeting had been. "I don't think so."

"Heh, well, we don't have to get into all that. Just come in. Stupid Akiharu isn't here yet. We just called and he was still at home."

"Oh my God, he'll never change. Last time he claimed he got confused by the time zone difference. That lousy tardy-man."

Mikoko sure was throwing stones at the proverbial glass house. It was almost impressive. But I wasn't in the mood to start teasing her about it, so I stayed silent as I removed my shoes.

At the end of the short hallway between the kitchen and bathroom was a single door. It seemed this was one of those sectioned-off one-rooms. Muimi-chan went ahead of us and opened the door. The room inside was about eight or nine mats in size, but the floors were hardwood. By the window was a bed, and in the middle of the room, a mini-table covered with cake, snacks, and a row of empty glasses. So this was more of a drinks thing than a dinner-thing affair after all.

A girl was sitting daintily beside the table. This time it had to be Tomo-chan. She was even more petite then Mikoko-chan, and dressed in a strawberry-patterned one-piece. Her hair was in pigtails. She gave me a little wave.

She was just as shy as I'd imagined. And yet something about her made me think she probably had a bad habit or two. It was like there was more than meets the eye—as if her simplistic form prevented you from being able to see through her. Thinking about it made me feel as though someone had asked me for the sum of all integers.

"No, wait."

That's all nonsense. Everyone feels that way when they meet someone for the first time. It wasn't technically my first meeting with Tomo-chan, but I didn't really know her, so it was only natural that I had this impression.

Hmm. Come to think of it, it did seem as though we had crossed paths a few times in our general education seminar. I joined her at the table so that I was facing her, and tossed out a simple greeting. "Yo." She looked at me a little crookedly, then gave me a politely deep bow.

"Thanks for going to all this trouble. Sorry to ask such a big favor." Her voice was pretty and calm, with a watery quality. "I've always wanted to have a chat with you, so I hope you have a good time today."

I was a little moved by her good manners. It was something I hadn't seen much lately (especially in the last day or two).

"Ahahaha, quick to break the ice, eh?" Mikoko-chan said as she sat down next to me on her knees. Muimi-chan, in turn, sat down next to her. This allowed enough room for Akiharu-kun to eventually come sit between me and Tomo-chan.

"Ahhh." Muimi-chan put out her cigarette with her own finger, then deposited it in an ashtray. "So what are we doing? We've got a brand-new guest here. Should we go ahead and

start? It seems stupid to sit around wasting time just because of that asshead."

"Hey, we can't do that," Mikoko-chan interjected. "For something like this we have to all be together! Right, Tomo-chan?"

"Yup, Mikoko's right." Tomo-chan nodded. "You know he'll be here soon, so don't be so impatient. Right?"

"I don't really care, but..." Muimi-chan gestured towards me. "What about Ikkun here?"

"I don't mind. I'm used to waiting." To be sure, that didn't mean I was used to people *making* me wait. But it would have been too much of a hassle to start an argument about it, so I just fed her an easy line.

Muimi shot me an inquisitive look, but "Well, whatever then," was all she said. She pulled out a fresh cigarette, then shot me another look. "Are you an antitobacco kind of guy?" she asked.

"I don't smoke myself, but you can smoke all you like."

"Ah. No, I'm good." She broke in half the cigarette she hadn't even lit yet and deposited it in the ashtray. "I make it a point not to smoke around nonsmokers."

"Huh."

Did that mean Mikoko-chan and Tomo-chan were both smokers? The fact that she had asked only me seemed to indicate such. Huh. I was a little surprised.

"Hey! Muimi-chan, you'll make me sound like a smoker if you put it like that!" Mikoko-chan objected once again. She was giving us the puppy-dog eyes. For some reason she seemed vehemently opposed to me finding out she was a smoker.

"But you do smoke."

"No I don't! I was just going with the flow that one time!"

"Ah, right. Gotcha. My fault, my fault." Muimi-chan gave her a friendly pat as she threw her little tantrum. Meanwhile, Tomo-chan watched on in delight.

Huh. It didn't take long to notice the dynamic here. It was the good girl, the bad girl, and the regular girl. This made me Wonder what Akiharu's role was. He finally showed up at 6:30, half an hour late.

"Sorry, sorry. I thought I'd be here on time, but the train was crowded and stuff," he said with good humor.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Tomo-chan said as she greeted him with a smile. The good girl.

"The train doesn't arrive any later just because it's crowded! And you live in a boarding house, so you don't even take the train anyway!" Mikoko-chan, the regular girl. She had the nerve to question his lame excuses.

"You think you can get off with a simple apology? You gotta chug three beers," Muimi-chan said, passing a beer bottle over to him. The bad girl.

"Okay, okay. Don't rush me so much, Atemiya. This is a birthday, a *birthday*. Not a mayday. Goddamn I'm a clever bastard. What the . . . ?" It seemed he had noticed my presence. He gave a problem-child sneer. "Heh heh, so you really brought him, Aoii," he said.

He sat down next to me and said, "Well, good to meet you," with a slight bow.

I did likewise.

He had an easy-breezy air about him, with light brown hair and a taste for street fashion. Maybe it wasn't uncommon for a university student to dress like that, but at Rokumeikan in particular, it was kind of unusual. Judging from his build, it

looked like he was involved in some kind of sport, but I couldn't tell which one.

"Umm, what do I . . . wha? Are we all supposed to just call you Ikkun then?"

"I don't mind."

"Really, really? Gotcha. You're a good guy. Don't you think so, Aoii?"

He shot Mikoko-chan a meaningful look. She shot back a flustered one. "Oh, uh, yeah." Judging from her response, it didn't seem like she thought I was a very good guy at all. Of course, considering how much I made fun of her, that was probably only natural.

"Well, shall we start?" Muimi-chan said. She seemed to be the leader of the four. She pointed at me. "Umm, you don't drink, right?" she said.

I nodded.

"Oh? What's this now, Ikkun? You can't go around being finicky all the time, you know. Alcohol is a vital component in man-to-man interactions after all, right? I mean, am I right or am I right?"

"Akiharu! What did I tell you about pushing your bullshit opinions on others?! I'll fucking kill you!" Muimi-chan gave him the look of death. Her cool, almost dazed demeanor from a moment ago had sharpened into a knife of fury. "Did you already forget what I told you last time? Huh?"

Akiharu quivered and tensed with fear. "Uh . . ."

"I'm not lookin' for an 'uhhh.' "

"Sorry."

"Not lookin' for a 'sorry' either. Why the hell are you apologizing to *me*? Huh?"

Akiharu-kun's mouth opened and closed like he was a suffocating fish. Then he looked over at me. "Please forgive me," he apologized.

"Okay, then," Muimi-chan said with a look of satisfaction. "Sorry there, Ikkun. He didn't mean anything by it. Forgive the guy, will ya?" She had completely returned to her origi-nal self and smiled back at me. "Did he piss you off?"

"Uh, I don't really care."

Atemiya Muimi. She was definitely an ex-delinquent. No, not *even* an "ex." I *thought* that brown *sauvage* seemed a little out of date.

Maybe I should call her Boss.

Meanwhile, Mikoko-chan poured some low-malt beer into each glass and lined them up in front of everyone. She also placed a single glass of oolong tea in front of me.

"So who's going to lead the proceedings? Shall it be Tomo-chan, our queen for a day?"

"Yeah, I believe it shall," Muimi-chan said. "Tomo, let's have it."

Tomo-chan raised her glass a bit reluctantly. "Okay then. To my twentieth birthday and our new friend."

Cheers.

I lightly tipped my glass.

3

"So the thing about friends is that they're like, eh, you know, like . . . y'know," Zerozaki said with a cynical smile. The tattoo scrawled across the right side of his face wrinkled unpleas-antly.

"What do you think?"

"You're actually asking me? I thought this was going to be some kind of spiel."

"Hah, don't expect me to do everything. They say if you want to figure out your own opinion, you gotta ask others theirs, right? So let's hear it. What do you think? What is a friend?"

"It's not such a hard question. It's just someone you hang out with, have meals with, joke around about stupid things with. Someone who brings you peace. That kind of thing, right?" he said.

"You got it. Exactamundo. If you look at it that way, friends are such a simple thing, man, like pie. You hang out, you eat together, act stupid and feel peaceful together, and that makes you friends. If you come to each other's rescue, you're *close* friends. If you smooch each other sometimes, you're lovers. Oh, what a treasure of life friendship is!" he said with a sneer.

"So the question here is, how long do these friendships last? A year? Five years? Ten years? Forever? Until tomorrow?"

"Is your point that even friendships come to an end?"

"My point is that *all* things come to an end."

"Well, sure. But without endings, there could be no beginnings. That's the vital subtext. If you're looking to gain something, you've got to be prepared to sacrifice one-third of it. If you want a payoff, you've got to take a risk. If you can't do that, you're better off just living with what you've got."

"Gahaha. I guess you must be that type."

I had no need for things I would just lose in time. If it was just going to end anyway, it didn't have to begin. I had no need for pleasure if it came accompanied by pain.

"Why? Are you any different?" I said.

If it meant never being sad, I didn't have to be happy.

If it meant never fading, I didn't have to succeed.

Evolution loaded with risk was a waste of time.

"Eh, but in reality, that's all true whether you're after something or not," I said.

"No doubt."

Zerozaki laughed. I didn't.

Be that as it may.

Three hours had passed since the party began. I won't get into what happened during those three hours. Nobody particularly wants others to see what they're like when they're drunk, and they certainly don't want to have the details relayed from person to person.

No matter how people feel while they're drinking, it's inevitable afterward that good old shame comes to pay them a visit. It's difficult to determine which is real: the person you are under the influence of alcohol, or the person you are when you're sober. But one thing's for sure: A wild night spent in good fun isn't something you want to try to recount later on. It's one of those "unpaintable scenes" like Urashima Tarô talked about.

Still, if I were to dare to share a little vignette of the evening's festivities just for kicks, it would go something like this:

"So whaddaya call a rock made of oxygen and nitrogen?"

"Quartz! Gaaahahahaha!"

"That's like a two-hundred shot barrage from a water-cooled heavy machine gun, only it's an assassin squad!"

"Shit, that aside, it's *hot* today. Why is it so hot in the middle of May? Is it global warming? Is it the greenhouse effect?"

"What?! Listen here, chump, if you want to complain about the summer heat, you answer to *me*! Bring it!"

"Are you the one they caught in *Catcher in the Rye*?!"

"It's a tropical night, that's what it is."

"Then I guess that makes me a tropical fish!"

And so three hours passed.

At present, Mikoko-chan, Akiharu-kun, and Tomo-chan were playing PS2. It looked like a racing game. Realistically depicted four-wheeled machines sped around the narrow on-screen circuit.

Huh. I wouldn't go so far as to call it tantalizing, but there was something rather pleasant about watching them all so fully immersed in their fun. It looked like they were willing to share some of that happiness with me, and somehow that made me surprisingly lonely.

"Well, I guess even this is—"

Someone slapped me on the shoulder. It was Muimi-chan. Apparently a heavy drinker, she didn't seem any different from when she was sober, even from a bystander's point of view.

She didn't call herself Boss for nothing. Not that she called herself Boss at all.

"Wanna go outside for a bit?" she said, pointing toward the entrance. "Let's go to the convenience store."

"What about Mikoko-chan and the others?"

"We can just let 'em be. They don't know what's going on right now anyway."

She was right about that. I nodded and left the room with her. We got back into the elevator, traveled down to the first floor, and exited the building.

"Is the convenience store close by?"

"Eh, it's a bit of a walk. But c'mon, let's walk a little bit. It'll help me sober up."

"You don't really seem drunk though."

"Maybe not on the surface, but I'm pretty far gone. It feels like my brain's flipped upside down so my cerebrum and cerebellum are switched. Right now I wanna kick the crap outta that sign."

"Just don't kick the crap out of me."

"I'll try," she said with a little laugh. She shook her head and looked up toward the sky.

"Doesn't really feel like a birthday party," I said. "I wonder if this is really enough to make Tomo-chan happy. She's still drunk now, but I wonder if she'll get depressed about it later."

"Yeah, I wonder . . . But it's still better than being depresssed from the very beginning. Yeah. It's all good. You don't need a good reason to get wild. Ahh . . . I'm groggy."

"You look pretty exhausted, Muimi-chan."

"Well, that's what I get for hanging out with those guys."

My sentiments exactly. Mikoko-chan was spunky enough to begin with, but when she was inebriated she was four times as bad. Then there was Akiharu-kun, and even Tomo-chan was getting pretty rowdy.

"Man, if you think about it, I guess being able to hold your liquor so well puts you at kind of a disadvantage. It must be hard to follow along with the mood."

"Exactly. I mean, it's still fun, so it's no big deal."

"You think it's okay to leave those three drunks in a room unattended?"

"They're not kids. They'll be fine. Actually, it's probably more dangerous to be walking around outside in the middle of the night," she said.

A good point. We were in the midst of the Kyoto Slasher serial murders. So that was why she bothered taking me along with her. I may look scrawny and unreliable, but I'm still a guy, in a manner of speaking.

"What a messed-up world, huh? What could be enjoyable about chopping up a human being?"

"Well, different strokes, I guess." I tried to brush off the topic. If I was thrust into a conversation about it, there was a chance I would let my tongue slip. It wasn't that Zerozaki had told me to keep my mouth shut, but it sure wasn't the kind of thing I wanted everyone and their mother to know about.

"I can't understand it at all," she said. "I mean, I've been around for twenty years now. Even I've thought to myself before, 'I oughta kill that bastard.' Actually, it happens a lot. Even nowadays. Like, 'this person would be better off dead. Killing him would serve the greater good.' "

". . . ."

"But what's up with these *random* killings? I can't understand the idea of finding pleasure in the act of killing itself."

"In general, they say serial killers who choose their targets at random are fueled by resentment. So it's just like when you say to yourself, 'I oughta kill that bastard,' " I said.

"Really? But then the killings aren't random."

"It's a little different, though. In this killer's case, he resents the victims simply because they happened to walk by. He resents the world as a whole. He hates the world that surrounds him, a world that, for him, is as vague and nebulous as the air. And so his killings *appear* to be random."

"Hmm . . ." She nodded, but to be honest, I was only speculating. I had no idea why he was committing acts of murder.

We had only talked about stupid, irrelevant things the previous night, and never touched upon the topic of his motives.

We were probably saving the best for last, childish as that may sound.

"It's just nonsense, though," I said.

Muimi-chan scratched her head at me.

While we were talking, we eventually reached the convenience store. She entered ahead of me and quickly made her way to the liquor section.

"You're buying more alcohol?"

"Nah, there's already plenty of that. Let's get some Pocari. Gotta sober those guys up or they won't be able to get home."

"Ah, gotcha."

We put three two-liter bottles of Pocari sports drinks in a basket, picked out two or three types of snacks, and proceeded to settle up at the register. Maybe I should've expected this, but I ended up carrying everything.

As we left the store, Muimi-chan pulled a cigarette from her pocket, stuck it in her mouth, and lit it with a cool-looking Zippo, all in one fluid motion.

"Ah!" she said and immediately went to extinguish it with her finger.

"I don't care if you smoke one. We're outside, anyway."

"Really?"

"Well, I guess it's rude to smoke and walk at the same time, but since it's night and nobody's around, it's probably fine as long as you don't litter ashes everywhere." And, indeed, there was no one around who'd object to her blowing smoke everywhere as she walked.

"Well . . . nah, it's okay. I'll stick to my decision." She went ahead and snuffed it with her finger. Then she curled up the

cigarette butt and put it in her pocket. It seemed she wasn't the littering type. I was a little impressed: For a college student, she had above-average morals.

"If you don't mind my asking, isn't that hot?" I said.

"Not really. I'm used to it," she said with a slightly bashful smile. "There was this Mafia boss bad guy in a movie I used to like, and he did the same thing with cigars. With the palm of his hand, like this. It was cool, so I started imitating it."

"Huh."

"Looking back, I just thought the actor was hot, but it's a habit now. Anyway, that aside . . . Ikkun, let's talk seriously for a minute." Her expression immediately grew serious, changing as abruptly as a circuit switch. I couldn't help but be a little surprised. "It's pretty tough keeping up with Mikoko's hyperness, huh?"

"Not particularly.''

"Huh," she said. Her expression grew all the more serious. She hesitated for a moment. "What do you think of her?" she asked me.

"What do I think?"

Judging from her expression, she wasn't looking for some halfhearted bullshit answer.

But I couldn't figure out what that question was supposed to mean. I didn't really think much of *anything* about her.

"Well, I think she's got a little bit of red in her hair. She's around five feet tall, and may or may not weigh as much as one hundred ten. From the way she acts, I'd guess she's a type B, and her astrological sign is probably one of the beasts. She's got a kind of koala-ish feel in general."

"Did you really think I was looking for a half-assed answer like that?" she asked.

Whoops. Delinquent mode. Why oh why do I so love stepping on land mines, I wondered. I broke eye contact with her.

"I dunno. I mean, she's a nice girl, I guess. Sure she's a little overly hyper, which can be exhausting, but I know a girl who's even worse than her, so it doesn't particularly bother me."

"Huh. How neutral of you."

"Well, I don't like making waves."

"Is that a fact?"

She paused for a moment, then gave me a sort of sidelong glance.

"You're kind of a slimeball, aren't you, Ikkun?" she said.

"I'm self-aware."

"Self-aware, huh? I wonder. I wouldn't know. Anyway, let me give you a word of advice." She took a step ahead and turned to face me directly. I had no choice but to stop. The apartment building was still about a hundred feet away. Surely the others were still inside racing. Muimi-chan ran her fingers through her *sauvage* hair and shot me a direct glare.

"Mikoko and I have been friends since we were just little brats."

"Huh."

"If you hurt her, I'll never forgive you."

I scratched my head a bit. Why was she telling me this? Could it be that she was mad because of all the times I had teased Mikoko-chan up to now? It didn't seem like the kind of thing to take so seriously, but Muimi-chan sure didn't seem to be joking, so I answered with a shrug.

"It's okay. Despite how it seems, I'm actually nice to my friends."

She blinked her narrowed eyes at me. “Hahahahaha!” she laughed. A moment later, she spun back around. “I stand corrected.” She recommenced walking. “You're just clueless.”

It felt like a terrible insult, but at the same time, it was probably the most accurate description anyone had ever applied to me in all my nineteen years, so it was hard to get mad.

We returned to the room to find that the others were indeed still racing. Surprisingly, Tomo-chan was apparently the most skilled. Mikoko-chan was a lap behind.

“Yo! Guzzle down this Pocari, you goons! You drunken bitches!”

For some reason Muimi-chan had suddenly gone berserk, smacking the “drunken bitches” in the heads with Pocari. Being hit in the head with a full plastic bottle should have been fairly painful, but they were so thoroughly numb with drink they didn’t even seem to mind.

I don’t like noisiness. I hate boisterousness. Loud situations irritate me.

But on occasion, like maybe once a year, maybe these things are kind of nice. Or so I thought.

I was wrong.

4

It was past eleven p.m.

“Well, thanks for tonight,” Muimi-chan said as she rose to her feet. “Akiharu, take me home.”

“Aw, why?” Akiharu whined. He shot her an aggravated look; he was sprawled out in the comer of the room. “Just go

yourself. I'm gonna rest a little before I go. Your place is far. My place is in the opposite direction."

"Are you a man? Don't tell me you're not even worth a ride home."

"Tch . . . fine."

He stood up, still looking aggrieved, as if he knew there was no point in objecting. His eyes shifted over to Tomo-chan. "Well, here's your birthday present," he said, pulling a package out of his bag.

"Ah . . . Muimi-chan said. "That's right, you give *presents* on birthdays . . ."

"Hm? What's that you say? What? Come again, Atemiya-san?" Akiharu-kun said with the glee of someone who had just defeated an ogre. "Don't tell me that you forgot to get your dear friend a birthday present! Oh my goodness, I cannot believe it! Is this a joke?! Ohh, what to do, what to do?! For the love of God, tell me, what to do?! Huh? Huh?"

"Cram it, oaf. Isn't my smile enough?" Muimi-chan said sulkily and headed toward the entrance.

"Hey, wait up! Don't get mad so easily! What are you, a kid?! Ahh, here we go. See ya at school, Emoto! Adieu! Let's hang out again soon, Ikkun!" Akiharu-kun gave a light wave and chased after Muimi-chan.

"Bye-bye. See ya again," Tomo-chan said as she waved sluggishly back. As soon as the two had left, her hands went for the present. She undid the ribbon and neatly opened the wrapping paper.

"I wonder what it is. Ikkun, what do you think it is?" It seemed the alcohol was mostly out of her system. Her cheeks still had a bit of red in them and her voice was a little shrill, but her personality seemed to have returned to its default

setting. “I’m a little excited. This kind of thing always makes me giddy.”

“Well, it’s probably not *yatsuhashi*, at any rate,” I said. Incidentally, the *yatsuhashi* I had brought had already been evenly divided among the stomachs of all five party members. “Judging from the size, it's probably an accessory or something.”

“Yeah, maybe. Oh, it’s a neckstrap. Pretty cool, huh?”

It was a capsule-style neckstrap with a liquid center. It didn’t really look like a girly item, but as Tomo-chan had said, it was pretty cool.

“Heheheh, it’s just what I was hoping for,” she said gleefully as she immediately tried it on. “How does it look, Ikkun?”

“It’s a good match,” I said, but I didn’t really know.

My eyes made their way from the gushing Tomo-chan over to Mikoko-chan, who was snoozing in the comer. She looked so peaceful that I couldn’t bear to wake her. Perhaps she was planning to just spend the night at Tomo-chan's place.

“Hey, Ikkun,” Tomo-chan said, suddenly straightening herself out. “I want to say thanks again for coming all the way out here today.”

“I don’t think it’s the kind of thing you have to thank me for.”

“But you don’t like doing this kind of thing, right?”

Her question was a little awkward, but it also came out as if it was something totally normal to her. She delicately raised her face to view my expression.

It was like . . .

She was looking *through* me.

Like she was looking at my brain from the inside.

"Uh, no, I . . ."

"You don't like opening up to other people, right?"

"It's all right. I don't hate it. I actually kind of like goofing around with everyone like chums."

"That's a lie."

"It's the truth."

"It's a lie."

"Yes, it is."

She snickered at me. But her eyes weren't smiling. They actually looked rather sad and lonely. The strange combination of expressions had me puzzled.

What was wrong? What reason could she have for looking so sad when she had spent her birthday surrounded by friends?

There shouldn't have been anything wrong.

Supposing there was . . .

"Mikoko-chan . . ." she said, casting a glance over at the slumbering Mikoko-chan. "She's really a great girl."

"Yeah," I responded. I was being unusually direct—by my standards, anyway. "I bet she is."

"I wanted to be like her."

"Mm-hmm."

"But I couldn't."

"Uh-huh."

She cast her eyes downward.

"And now here I am, twenty years old, still unable to be like her. I'm sure it'll go on like that. No matter how many years pass, no matter how many decades. I'll never be like her, until the day I die."

"What's wrong with that? Everyone's different."

"Say, Ikkun," she said, looking up again. "Have you ever felt like, as a human, you're damaged goods?"

I had no idea how to respond.

"I have." She was smiling. It was the saddest smile I had ever seen.

"Everybody does . . ." The words just came out. Whether they were really from the heart, I didn't know. They were just words of comfort. I was probably just saying words I didn't really mean so as to not have to see Tomo-chan look so sad.

What a slimeball.

How comical.

How terribly unseemly.

"Everyone feels like that sometimes, I suppose. Nobody's perfect, after all. We've all got our strong points and our weak points. That's what makes us human."

"Yeah, I know. Even I know that, but you probably understand that that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about something more finite, I guess, or more lethal, like a fatal wound, I guess."

Boom.

The words shook me.

"It's kind of like that."

". . . ." So this was the real reason I couldn't read Emoto Tomoe very well. *Perhaps this was really it.*

In other words, a long time ago . . .

"There's another me right here," she said, pointing over her own right shoulder. "When I get all rowdy and have fun with

Muimi-chan and Akiharu-kun and Mikoko-chan and you like this, that part of me is just watching on, sighing. It's looking down on me with cold disdain as I have my fun, saying 'What you're doing won't amount to anything.' "

"Sighing," she said. "I know I'll probably never be like Mikoko-chan until the day I die, but maybe I'll be able to once I really do die. If I'm reincarnated, I want to come back as Mikoko-chan. I want to be able to laugh with complete innocence like her, to get mad when I want to be mad, to cry like crazy when I'm sad. That's what makes a great life."

"I . . ." This time I was speaking from the heart. "I don't want to be reincarnated. I want to just hurry up and die."

"I'll bet," she said with a gentle smile.

• • •

Mikoko-chan woke up around one hour later.

"Uhhh." She shook the sleep out of her head. She still looked pretty tired.

"So what're you going to do?" I said. "I'm going home. Are you going to stay the night?"

"No, I'll go . . ." She rose to her feet in a daze. "It's okay, I've sobered up. Give me ten more seconds."

"Sure. I'll take you home, then." I was at least worth a ride home, I wanted to emphasize, but she didn't seem to get it. She had been deeply immersed in sleep when Muimi-chan left, so that made sense.

"Well, bye-bye, Tomo-chan."

"Yep. See ya later." She gave a little wave.

I took my bag and headed toward the entrance. I sat down in the doorway and put on my shoes. They had messy laces, so

putting them on was always much more of a hassle than removing them. Situations like these were an irritating waste of time. Meanwhile, Mikoko-chan seemed to be having problems with her own footwork, and a clumsy clopping noise could be heard through the door separating us.

It probably wasn't something to worry about. She appeared in the hallway outside the entrance shortly after me.

"Ohh," she moaned, rubbing her head. "My head hurts . . . It's spinning. It's like a murder at a convenience store, only the murderer is wearing Rollerblades."

"I have no idea what you're saying. Are you sure you don't want to stay here for the night? There's no need to overexert yourself."

"It's okay, I can go."

She hobbled down the hall on unsteady feet. I gave a shrug and followed after her.

"So did you have fun?" she said once we were out of the building.

"Eh, I guess. But I think I'll pass next time."

"Don't say that. Let's do it again! With everyone! When's your birthday?"

"March."

She looked defeated. "Mine's in April. Ohh, I guess I should've invited you sooner."

"So where's your place? I'll take you back."

"Near Horikawa. Horikawa Oike. But we've got to go to your place first."

"Why?"

"My scoot . . ."

Come to think of it, she had come as far as my place on her bike.

"Can you drive?"

"Sure . . ."

'Okay then." Obviously she was in no condition to drive, but if she said she could drive, who was I to stop her? When the time came, she could just call a taxi if she had to.

We took Nishiôji Street up to Nakadachiuri and broke east, when for some reason, David Bowie music started playing from somewhere. Thinking it was a nearby guerrilla concert, I was a bit taken aback, but it turned out to be Mikoko-chan's ringtone.

"Hm?" She pulled her phone out of her purse. "Hello? This is Mikoko-chan, the spunky and energetic girl of Lake Ashi! Hm? What? Tomo-chan?" It seemed it was a call from Tomo-chan. "Yeah. Yeah . . . Yeah, he's here with me right now. He's walking right in front of me. Sure, I guess. Okay, I'll pass it over."

She passed me the phone. "It's Tomo-chan. She wanted me to give you the phone."

"Me? Why?"

". . . . ?"

I must have forgotten something at her place. I scratched my head as I took the phone. It was more than a little smaller than my own phone, so it felt kind of awkward.

"Hello?"

". . . ."

"Hello?"

"Ikkun."

A voice.

It was quivering, like she was afraid of something. It could've been partially the phone's fault, but something in her

voice was obviously different from when we had spoken moments earlier at her place.

"Tomo-chan?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong? Did I forget something? I've got my bag here."

"No, it's not that. Um . . . I forgot to tell you something earlier."

Forget to tell me something?

"Yeah, what?"

"Never mind. See you."

Click.

Suddenly the call was cut off. *Beeeep*. *Beeeep*. *Beeeep*. *Beeeep*. After four rings, I took the phone away from my ear. I scratched my head, stared at it for another three seconds, then handed it back to Mikoko-chan. "Thanks."

"Sure," she said, taking it. "So what'd she say?"

"Nothing. I don't know what that was about."

"Huh?"

She gave me a confused expression, but I was the one who was confused. Tomo-chan wanted to tell me something? Why would she start and then stop like that?

"What? I wonder what it was. Maybe it was a secret or something. Did you guys have some kind of secret talk?"

"No, nothing like that, but . . . oh yeah, Mikoko-chan." I switched trains of thought. "Is there somebody right here?" I said, drawing a circle with my finger over her right shoulder.

"Huh?"

She raised a dubious eyebrow at me. Naturally.

"I mean, do you get the feeling someone is right there, looking down on you?" I asked.

"I don't think so, but . . . why?"

"Eh, if you don't feel it then don't worry about it."

"If somebody was there, it'd be pretty scary," she said as she imagined it. "But as for in here," she said, pointing to her own heart, "there is somebody."

Huh. I nodded. Judging from her bashful smirk, she must have been talking about her boyfriend.

In about ten more minutes, we had arrived at my apartment. In the apartment parking lot, there was only a single bike, so it must have been hers.

"Whoa, it's a Vespa." And a white vintage model, no less.

This girl called her Vespa a "scooter"? A Vespa is a Vespa, and only a Vespa. Calling it a scooter was, to me, an insult. And not just your everyday insult—it was the *ultimate* insult, which threatened to shake my very existence. Everyone has one thing that they'd sacrifice their own life for, that they'd trade the world for, and to me, this was that thing. I wanted to shout at Mikoko-chan. I angrily turned to face her.

". . . ."

She was sleeping.

"I'm speechless."

She was sleeping standing up. She had been awfully quiet for a while. Was it possible that she had been sleepwalking? She probably had been. This was the power of the human race pushed to its absolute limit. I gave her a few taps on the cheek, but she refused to wake up. I had the urge to start stretching her face, but it seemed that there would be no way to explain my way out of it if somebody happened to see us, so I restrained myself.

"I wonder if I could just leave her here . . ."

If not, there were only two options.

"Hup," I groaned as I lifted her onto my back. She stirred a little bit on the way, but didn't wake up. Likely because she was so short, she was actually quite light. Or maybe all girls were like this.

With her still on my back, I entered the apartment, then made my way up the stairs to the second floor. I clomped my way down the boarded hallway to the room next to my own.

I knocked lightly.

"Yeah, wait one moment," an answer came from inside. Miiko-san soon appeared before us. She was dressed in yet a different set of Japanese summer casual wear, which was red this time. I was pretty sure this was the outfit with the word *Treachery* printed on the back.

"Yes?" she said, eyeing the girl on my back suspiciously. "You're still under legal age, right?" she said after a moment's thought. "Well, of course I'll let you hide out here, but speaking purely out of kindness, I suggest you just turn yourself in. Japan has a pretty capable police force. Not likely that you'll be able to escape."

"Oh, it's nothing like that this time. Er, this girl's a classmate. Looks like she drank too much and passed out. Would you be willing to let her spend the night?"

"Huh?" She put her hand to her chin and thought for a moment. "Why don't you just put her up yourself?"

"Eh, but I mean, as you can see, she's a girl. And it sounds like she's got a boyfriend, so I can't just have her sleeping over in my place, right?"

"Huh. Well, if that's how it is, I guess I don't mind. But what is given today I will one day receive. To ignore thanks where they're due is a dastardly deed."

"I gotcha. Want to go antiquing again?"

"Yes. Okay then. So what's this girl's name?"

"Mikoko-chan. Er, last name is Aoi, I think."

"Aoi Mikoko? Heh, strange name," Miiko-san said, taking Mikoko-chan from me. Everyone should have a neighbor as dependable as her.

"Well, I'll be on my way then."

"Mm. Get some sleep. You'd best not make yourself out to be some afternoon-sleeping lollygagger."

"Huh? I never sleep in the afternoon."

"Is that so? Well, just forget that then. Good night."

"Good night."

I bowed and returned to my room, where I laid down my futon and curled up on it.

"Time to sleep."

And so the day ended. Saturday, May fourteenth. No, it had already passed zero o'clock, so it was Sunday the fifteenth. So at zero o'clock twenty-four hours later, it would be the sixteenth. The next zero o'clock would be the seventeenth.

Zero o'clock.

Zerozaki.

Wondering if that human failure was currently killing his seventh person or had perhaps already dismembered his eighth, the damaged goods gradually fell into a slumber.

Emoto Tomoe,
classmate.

3

THE AGE OF THE CLAIRVOYANT MAN

The Murderer

No more.
I don't want to think anymore.

1

When I awoke to a knocking at the door, it was already past eight o'clock.

I brushed the hair out of my face with both hands and rose to my feet.

"Uhhh."

I opened the door to find Mikoko-chan. Her usual hyper greeting had been replaced with a shy look of apologetic embarrassment.

"Did I wake you?" she said meekly.

"Eh. It was time to wake up anyway," I answered as I stretched out. "Morning, Mikoko-chan."

"Good morning, Ikkun. Um . . . I'm sorry about yesterday. I sort of, er . . . it looks like I fell asleep."

"Eh, forget about it. Just be sure to thank Miiko-san."

"Ah, right." She nodded after a moment of ambiguous hesitation.

"Isn't she a good person?"

"Well, yeah, she is, huh? Kind of cool, I guess you could say. So is she the 'swordswoman freeloader' you were talking about?"

"Does she look like a thirteen-year-old little sister?"

"No, I guess not." She awkwardly broke eye contact with me and gave a brief pause. "I don't know if it's because she practices sword fighting, but her clothes were kind of weird. Sort of Japanesey, but like the kind of thing you'd wear to a festival."

"You mean her *jinbei*?"

"A djembe? What's that?" Evidently Mikoko-chan had never heard of it. "Oh, you mean like a *jinbei* shark?"

"Uhh, well, yeah. Have you ever seen the pattern on the back of a *jinbei* shark? It's just like they're wearing that same type of clothing. So we ended up naming that kind of Japanese clothing *jinbei*, after the shark."

"Ahh. You sure know a lot, Ikkun," she said. "I'll have to teach that to Tomo-chan and the others."

Yep. And if Tomo-chan and the others weren't as cruel as me, they would probably teach her the truth. Why did I tell such meaningless lies? Perhaps it was time I gave that some serious thought.

"So anyway," Mikoko-chan said, changing the subject. "Are you and that girl—Asano-san—are you two close?"

"She's saved me from starvation a few times. But then I saved her from being crushed under a pile of antiques, so we're even Steven. Those *yatsuhashi* you had yesterday were from her too."

"Huh," she said with a complicated expression. "You know, I don't really like *yatsuhashi*."

"Huh? Oh, you don't say."

"Too sweet."

"Huh. Miiko-san likes sweet stuff."

"Well, I don't."

For some reason she was getting a little serious. I scratched my head at her, not sure where she was going with this.

"Well, that's fine. So what are you going to do now?" I said.

"Oh, er, I've got this," she said, pulling a pink, wrapped present from her purse. "It's Tomo-chan's birthday present. Forgot to give it to her. Big mistake, huh? I should've given it to her before we all got drunk. I got carried away trying to get things going."

"Hm. Well, why not go give it to her now? She should be home."

"Yup, that's the plan." At last, she showed her trademark smile. "Well, thank you. Let's get together again."

"We'll see."

"Why do you say stuff like that?! Let's do something!"

"Just kidding. Fine by me. If I've got time, I'll spend as much of it with you as you want, so please invite me again," I said.

I only said it to be polite, but seeing Mikoko-chan's face light up, the guilt kicked in. Thinking she'd probably burst into tears or rage if I said "just kidding" again, I just said, "See you next time," instead.

She gave a big, energetic nod and spun on her heels.

Something came to mind. "Hey, Mikoko-chan. Let me just say one more thing."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Call a Vespa a Vespa. Calling it a *scoot* is just offensive, so knock it off."

"Wow, Ikkun giving an order?! It's like a first-rate school where you can wear your own clothes, but all the students show up in uniforms anyway!"

"You got it or not?"

"Wow, you're as scary as Muimi-chan . . ."

She seemed to seriously be a little scared. But I had to say it firmly or she wouldn't get it.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be careful from now on." She made her way down the hall. When she reached the comer, she turned back around. "Hey! I've got something I want to say to you too!"

"Huh? What?"

She took a big breath. "My last name is Aoii! Not Aoi! I told you not to forget!"

I wanted to tell her I knew that, but then I realized that I had introduced her to Miiko-san as "Aoi Mikoko." Miiko-san was the kind of person who was hard to correct once certain information had entered her brain (thanks to me, she still believed Shakespeare was a flavor of a McDonald's McShake), so she had probably spent the morning calling her "Aoi" over and over. Well, maybe not that many times.

To me it didn't seem like the difference between Aoi and Aoii was such a big deal, but I decided that was probably fairly rude. Japanese are as proud of their last names as Italians.

"Okay. I won't forget again. I promise."

"Okay then. Also . . ." She turned halfway back around. "I don't have a boyfriend," she said softly, then quickly made her way down the stairs as if trying to escape.

"Huh?" I probably looked more than a little confused.

Er . . .

What was that about?

She had probably heard that from Miiko-san as well. I did seem to remember having that kind of conversation with her. Something about Mikoko-chan not being able to stay in my room because she had a boyfriend. But Miiko-san, she . . .

"I don't go around regurgitating every little detail like that."

Whoa. At some point she had appeared in front of me.

"Looks like we've got a couple people yelling in this dilapidated apartment. Never mind that everyone can hear you from their rooms; if you shout like that, the whole building's gonna come down."

"Heh . . ."

"Now then, I have to go to work. Let's hope that classmate of yours learns to mind her p's and q's," she said, and shuffled her way down the hall. There was something frightening about the fact that *Rage* was written on the back of her blue *jinbei*. Maybe she and Mikoko-chan hadn't gotten along so well. Their names were sort of similar and all.

But in that case, the name thing seemed kind of dubious.

"Maybe she was actually awake last night . . ."

Sleeping while standing up is one thing, but walking around while asleep isn't all that easy. The power of the human race pushed to its absolute limit isn't something you see every day. Maybe Mikoko-chan had actually been awake, how lucid she may or may not have been at the time notwithstanding. Maybe that was why she knew I had mistaken her name and said she had a boyfriend.

She probably just didn't want to bother with making the trip home. But then she could've just said so without pretending she was asleep. Some people sure do strange things, I thought as I went back inside.

2

Now then.

It was precisely that evening when the story started getting altogether tiresome.

As I was alone in my room reading a fat book I had checked out from the school library, a wild knocking came at my door. Now, it's only natural to be irritated when someone interrupts your valued quiet time like this, but having become rather accustomed to this kind of thing by now, I wasn't particularly angry. Wondering if it was that damned fifteen-year-old brother coming to ask for money again, I opened the door.

"Oh."

It was an older guy and a girl I had never seen before.

There was something particularly peculiar about the guy. He was probably in his mid-to-late thirties, and not so much tall as long-legged. Moreover, he had his hair slicked back. Stranger still, even in this heat he was dressed in a black suit and tie. It was a disturbingly bizarre way to be dressed. He even had sunglasses on. If he had been a foreigner, I would've been afraid it was the MIB here to erase my memory.

The woman, on the other hand, was dressed in a slightly more normal suit and tight skirt. She had straight, black hair, and was relatively pretty. But the look in her eyes was not ordinary. Without a hint of the reservation normally expected when meeting someone for the first time, her eyes met mine with a penetrating, *gouging* gaze.

She took a step forward. "Have a look," she said, flashing me a police badge. "I'm Sasa Sasaki of the Kyoto Police First Investigative Division." It was the kind of name that threat-

ened to make you bite your own tongue. Her parents must have been awfully whimsical.

"Oh. Hey."

I gave a little head bob for the time being. The woman—Sasaki-san—seemed a bit surprised by my reaction. Maybe I should've shown more surprise myself, but it didn't take more than a glance to tell that these two were obviously police officers. The thought of these two stone-faced individuals being anything other than police officers was, to me, unimaginable.

The male officer chuckled to himself a bit and showed his own badge, "Ikaruga Kazuhito from the same division. Mind if we come inside for a bit?" It was essentially coercion in the form of a question. As a kid, I naturally felt the urge to defy this coercion, but it didn't look like this Kazuhito-san would let it fly.

"Oh, uh, well, sure. It's small, though."

I invited them into the room. They seemed surprised to find that the inside of the room was just as small as I'd said, but they passed it off with an impressive coolness. If I was their boss, I would've given them a raise. Of course, not being their boss, I didn't give them squat.

"Please have a seat over there," I said. I poured water into two cups and placed them in front of the pair. Just as Mikoko-chan had the day before, they ignored this completely.

"Allow me to be frank," Sasaki-san said, eyeing me firmly. "Emoto Tomo-san is dead."

"Oh." I prepared myself a glass of water and sat down across from them. "Is that right?"

" 'Is that right?' Is that all you have to say?" Sasaki broke her poker face for the first time.

"Oh, well, I'm not much for expressing emotion. I'm totally shocked on the inside, so don't pay it any mind."

That and, by this point, I was becoming kind of used to this sort of thing.

But I really was shocked. This was half because Tomoe-chan had been killed, and half because the instant I had seen these two outside my door, I had guessed they were here to talk about Zerozaki.

I was half-relieved, half-stupefied. It was like a contradictt-tion of emotions swirling around in my gut.

"Umm, is it safe to assume that since there are detectives oil the case, she didn't die under ordinary circumstances? Not to mention that you're from the First Investigative Division."

Considering the kinds of cases First Investigative Divisions usually handle.

"That's correct." Sasaki-san nodded. The seriousness of her expression was pure and undiluted.

"So was it, by any chance, the 'prowler'?"

She shook her head at my inquiry. "No."

"Oh, really."

It was like something had deflated. Part of me was relieved. I couldn't help but wonder why, but I quickly switched trains of thought.

"What happened, then?"

"Her body was found this morning. She had been strangled to death."

"Strangled?"

Strangulation.

Emoto Tomoe.

Murdered . . . ?

I felt my heart going cold.

Just how many people had I seen die? How long had it been since I stopped counting dead friends? My first encounter with death was before I could even remember.

"It's been about a month since the last one, huh? That's got to be a new record."

Sasaki-san gave me a sideways look. It was entirely different from the kind of sideways looks Mikoko-chan gave me, a purely intellectual pose completely devoid of any adorable charm. Then again, in my whole life, I had never seen a pose that was both intellectual *and* adorably charming, whether it be from a male or a female.

"Did you say something?"

"No, just talking to myself. I do that a lot. They say I'm just a nineteen-year-old soliloquy that can dress itself and walk around."

Although Sasaki-san looked satisfied with this answer, she didn't crack so much as a smirk.

Suddenly I noticed that Kazuhito-san had been closely monitoring my expression. I kept quiet.

Interesting.

That explained the need for sunglasses. Sasaki-san was in charge of doing the talking. Kazuhito-san was the observer. It was marvelous nonsense. A true masterpiece.

It seemed I was a prime suspect.

"I guess that makes sense. I was with her all night."

"Did you say something?"

"No, just your plain old, everyday nonsense." I sat myself up straight. Not that I was nervous, but maybe it was time to start getting a little more serious. "So if she was killed, who killed her?" I asked.

"That's currently under investigation. To tell you the truth, that's the reason we've come here today," Sasaki-san said.

"Then tell me," I wanted to say, but I refrained from provoking her.

"You were in Emoto-san's apartment from about six in the evening to midnight. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Just to check, would you tell us the names of the other people present during that period of time?"

"Umm." Good luck, memory. "Emoto Tomoe-san, Atemiya Muimi-san, Aoi . . . no, Aoii Mikoko-san, and Usami Akiharu-kun. And then me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You arrived with Aoii-san. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Aoii-san first came to my place—here, I mean—then we went to Emoto-san's place together. It was around six p.m."

"More specifically? Was it before six or after?"

"Before."

She was barraging me with questions. The limitations of my mind's processing speed had been surpassed long ago, and my head was spinning.

"So all of the guests were there at that time . . ."

"Please wait a minute," I interrupted. "I can't settle down and focus if you keep throwing out questions one after another like that. I think I mentioned that, but this all has me a little mixed up."

"Oh, sorry about that," Sasaki-san said. It was the most unapologetic apology of all time.

I spent the next hour responding to her assault of questions, divulging every last detail of the previous night's events. The things we talked about during the party. The atmosphere of the party. My going to the convenience store with Muimi-chan. Returning. Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan leaving at around eleven o'clock. Akiharu-kun giving Tomo-chan a present just before that. The neckstrap. My talk with Tomo-chan after that. Leaving the apartment with Mikoko-chan in tow. The phone call from Tomo-chan around the time we reached Nishiôji Nakadachiuri. Leaving Mikoko-chan with Miiko-san because she appeared to be sleeping (whether it was the truth or not, I didn't know). And then, sleeping. Mikoko-chan's short visit in the morning. The rest of the day, which I spent reading.

I didn't bother mentioning the intense pressure of having Kazuhito-san peering over Sasaki-san's shoulder the whole time when she was already plenty scary on her own. We were just sitting and talking, but I felt like I had wasted a great deal of energy. And then there was Sasaki-san's brilliant last line.

"Okay, so far this pretty much matches what we've already heard."

Boy, she was super.

The string of questions seemed to have come to an end for the time being. "Hmm," Sasaki-san said with a perplexed look. But something about it seemed like an act. If Mikoko-chan could be called a person of no façades, this woman, on the other hand, was a person of nothing but façades, to the point that they appeared to be her true personality. She certainly wouldn't be the easiest person in the world to deal with.

"So how about that phone call?" she said with a finger to her temple. "She really didn't say anything? According to

Aoii-san, Emoto-san specifically asked her to pass you the phone, from which one could deduce that she had something to say to you."

"She began to say something, but she didn't. She just said 'never mind,' and hung up."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"And it was definitely Emoto-san on the phone?"

"Yes. I never mistake voices of people I know."

She exchanged glances with Kazuhito-san behind her. It looked like they were done questioning and about to be on their way, but I couldn't just sit idly by in silence.

"Umm, Sasaki-san, may I ask a question?"

"Huh?"

Her poker face broke down once again, naturally. Having had a younger boy suddenly address her by her first name, it would've been stranger if she *hadn't* been surprised.

"Something's been bothering me."

"Uh-huh . . ." She exchanged another glance with Kazuhito-san. He responded with nothing more than the slight drop of his jaw. Apparently a sign of consent; Sasaki-san turned back toward me. "Okay."

This consent was most likely not spurred by sympathy for a boy whose classmate had just been murdered, but by the mean-spirited notion that they could use my question to see into me. Not that I cared.

"Um . . . by any chance, was Aoii-san the one who discovered the body?"

"That's correct," she answered coolly, providing no further explanation. It seemed they had no intention of telling me anything more than necessary to answer my questions. Of

course, they probably wouldn't answer all of my questions either.

So I was right, after all. She had gone to drop off Tomo-chan's birthday present, but there had been no answer. She tried calling, but nobody picked up. The door to the building had an autolock, but surely that was easy enough to get around. All she had to do was follow one of the residents inside. In that sense, it hardly even passed as a lock.

Hmm . . .

Mikoko-chan.

How must she have felt at that time? She was always so full of emotion. What could she have possibly felt at a time like that?

"Maybe I should've gone with her. . . ."

But then again, how could I have known? Besides, I wasn't sure I would've been much help even if I had gone along. I wasn't worth that much. I might have ended up just making her angry.

"Is that your only question?"

"No, I've got a few more. What was the time of death?"

"We've determined that it was sometime between eleven p.m. on the fourteenth and three a.m. on the fifteenth."

"In that case . . ." Mikoko-chan and I had left her apartment at midnight, which meant that the crime must have occurred between midnight and three a.m. "Er, and you say she was strangled, correct? There wasn't a knife involved or anything?"

"That's what I said." She narrowed her eyes at my mentioning of the word *knife*. Of course I didn't tell her, not even with my eyes, that I knew a certain knife-wielding killer.

"Was it a rope?"

"It was a thin piece of cloth. She most likely died instantly from vascular compression. I doubt she suffered much."

This was most human thing Sasaki-san had said so far. But to me, whether Tomo-chan suffered or not was relatively trivial. Either way, she was dead.

I knew what it was to die. It isn't death that people fear: It's nothingness. Pain is nothing more than a peripheral add-on, despair nothing more than decoration.

"Um, have you already gone to see everyone else?"

"Everyone eke?" Sasaki-san replied, even though she knew damn well what I meant.

"Everyone who was gathered at Emoto-san's place last night. Usami-kun, Atemiya-san, and Aoii-san."

I asked this without any particular expectation. I figured she probably wouldn't even answer. But to my surprise, she answered immediately.

"Yes, we have," she said. "We've finished questioning all of them. Your address was a little hard to find, so we ended up coming here last."

"What was everyone doing during that window of time when Emoto-san was killed?"

One more step. I cautiously took another step forward.

Sasaki-san's lips curled up into a vague smirk. "Usami-san and Atemiya-san say they spent the night singing karaoke in Shijôkawara-machi. As for Aoii-san, well, it probably goes without saying."

It did. Mikoko-chan was staying with Miiko-san in the room next door. I felt a little relieved. If you could believe Sasaki-san's claim, that meant that the top three suspects all had alibis. Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan could only account

for each other, so their alibi wasn't exactly watertight, but it was enough to loosen any suspicions toward them.

I felt the pressure of Kazuhito-san's gaze grow even stronger.

"Tch . . ."

How unseemly.

Much too late, I broke eye contact with the two of them.

Dammit. They had set me up to feel at ease. They had caused me to let my guard down. I had been careless. These two detectives aside, you were never supposed to let your guard down around a police officer.

Shit . . . what had they seen?

"Is that all, then?" Sasaki-san asked without a hint of change in her tone.

"Oh, no. One more."

If I had ever known failure, surely this was that time. Kazuhito-san's penetrating gaze was minute subtlety compared to what I was about to face.

But it was a subtlety that had flustered me enough to ask a question I didn't even have to ask, a question that I *shouldn't* have asked.

"Who do you suppose did it?"

It was a question that had already been answered. And I had gone and repeated it.

"That's currently under investigation," Sasaki-san answered with a meaningful gaze—and the smile of a predator who had just bagged its prey. She rose to her feet. "Pardon us for intruding for so long. I think we'll be back again later to talk more," she said, placing her calling card on the floor. "If you remember anything else, please give us a call."

I took the card in my hand. It gave a number for the prefectural police as well as her own cell phone number.

"Well, take care, Mr. Student," Kazuhito-san said with a smirk, and began to make his way out of my room.

Interesting . . . so *he* was the real faker. I had committed such a fatal misstep that I didn't even deserve to call myself a passive bystander anymore. I had completely mixed up the roles of the two detectives.

In other words, it was Kazuhito-san who was rushing me along while Sasaki-san had been absorbing everything I said.

And what's more, Sasaki-san had purposely let down her guard and invited me to attack.

The gall. The utter audacity.

"Oh, by the way," Sasaki-san said as if just remembering something. "About your alibi. For the time being, it's been confirmed by your neighbor, Asano-san. She said you can hear people walking down the hallway from inside the rooms."

She flashed me a refined smile. This was essentially a checkmate. No, this didn't even make for a match.

She even had the nerve to throw in this little scrap of compassion at the end there.

Well, son of a bitch.

I don't know if it was because I hadn't dealt with them for a long time, but I had completely underestimated the Japanese police. Did my arrogance know no bounds? Who the hell did I think I was?

It was the first time I had felt such defeat since my run-in with that redheaded private contractor.

I chewed my lower lip. "Kazuhito-san," I said to him as he was leaving.

"Hm?" He looked back.

"If you were better-looking, you'd be a dead ringer for Matsuda Yûsaku."

"Guess that means I'm *not* a dead ringer for Matsuda Yûsaku."

It was a bull's-eye answer. My last hopeless jab at him had been a big whiff, and with that, the two detectives were on their way. I cleared away the cups and plopped myself onto the floor.

It had been a decisive defeat. I hadn't felt this sensation in a month, and I hadn't felt it this strongly in a whole year. But in this case I could just abandon the emotion. When you thought about the fact that someone had just died, it was all too trivial.

"Tomo-chan . . ."

I tried whispering the name aloud. The first thing to come to mind was our conversation from the previous night.

"Have you ever felt like, as a human, you're damaged goods?"

Now, now, Tomo-chan, that's not the sort of thing one admits out loud, isn't it?

It's better to not know things; it helps us go on living. As long as we're not too aware of ourselves, we can live in happiness. You might compare us to an airplane that's lost its engine and wings. We're nothing but insignificant nobodies who can only soar like crows who can't call out. Once you start questioning things, it's all over.

It's not about denial. It's about ignorance.

"You can get killed asking questions like that." As someone with experience, it wasn't my job to just dish out empty words of condolence. "If you put your mind to it, it's only

natural . . . whether you're a person like us or not . . . Or rather, if you don't put your mind to anything, that is."

Having realized these things myself long ago, I was now a person living without purpose, just as Tomo-chan had been living a life without meaning.

I closed my eyes.

And I opened them.

"Well, so much for mind over matter."

I swiftly rose to my feet.

Now then.

What to do now? There was nothing I was supposed to do, but plenty of things I wanted to. For me, this was a fairly rare condition.

First, I took out my cell phone. I checked the call history, then began to dial Mikoko-chan's number. But halfway through, I stopped myself.

"Seriously, who the hell do I think I am?"

This was utter and complete nonsense. If I did call Mikoko-chan, what did I possibly have to say to her?

So I put off calling her. At that moment, I just didn't have the right words to say to her.

"In that case . . ."

First things first. I cleared my phone and began reentering a phone number. It was the one and only phone number I knew by heart. With the phone at my ear, I tried to remember how long it had been since we'd talked.

She picked up immediately.

"Ohhh! Ii-chan! A long time indeed, old friend! Do you still love me?"

Her hyperness dwarfed Mikoko-chan's by a factor of about twelve; unlike Mikoko-chan, once you removed her stopper,

the gushing would never end. If you let her alone, she would shoot all the way up to Heaven like the Tower of Babel.

"What oh what oh what oh what is wrong? You *never* call me! This moment is monumental! It's the Himeji Castle! It must be a diversionary tactic! Hyaooo! I wanna take a photograph to record it, but a photograph can't capture sound so there'd be no point! Therefore, commence audio recording!"

"You don't have to bother with the audio recording."

I made an effort to keep my cool.

Muimi-chan had asked me if it was tough keeping up with Mikoko-chan's hyperness, but as I had told her, compared with Kunagisa, Mikoko-chan was pretty much a piece of cake.

If Mikoko-chan was happy-go-lucky, then Kunagisa Tomo was happy-go-crazy.

"Tomo, are you free much these days?"

"Nope! More on the busy side. Extremely occupado. My processing power is facing an imminent meltdown! Emergency memory expansion! Defrag imperative! I'm going to freeze! Oh my God, it's happening! It's happening! Present progressive form! Please reboot!"

"Is it this Kyoto prowling serial killer case?"

"Bingo! Wowww! You're like Maki-chan! Or the red contractor! Kyahahahahaha! Return of the ESP! And forever! Mankind's strongest! This is the end!"

"Sorry, Tomo, could you dial it down a notch?"

"Huh? What's wrong? Well, whatever. Yep, it's the Kyoto prowling serial killer case! But you know what? It's not going the way I expected! This darn case! Hurdles! Serious hurdles! Surely the killer is the reincarnation of Dread Jones! Wahaha!"

"Let's make a deal, Kunagisa Tomo," I said. "I'll give you some information on this Kyoto prowler case. You'll give me information on a certain murder that's come up."

"Huh?"

She thought for a moment. I knew she wouldn't ask me why I had information on the prowler case or why there was a murder case I was interested in. I believed in her, and she trusted me.

Unnecessary explanations.

Excess clarifications.

Wasted words.

Inane questions.

Distracting chatter.

The very best thing about Kunagisa was that she had no use for any of these things.

"Ehh, I don't like this word *deal*, Ii-chan."

"How's *bargain*?"

"Awful."

"*Pact*?"

"Almost there."

"*Conspiracy*?"

"Not technically wrong, but something's off."

"Well, then what about a *mutual complementing of each other's attributes*?"

"Yeah, that'll do," she said happily.

Give or take.

At this point, I still hadn't decided which.

3

After finishing my call with Kunagisa, I went to visit Miiko-san next door. I knocked on her door.

"Yo," came her response. Several seconds later, the door opened. As usual, she was dressed in a *jinbei*. It seemed to me that if she was going to take such an avid interest in Japanese clothing, she ought to get herself a nice, pretty kimono. It definitely would've looked good on her.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, I just wanted to thank you. They said you vouched for my alibi."

"I didn't do anything remarkable. I just told the truth."

"Yeah, but I created an unnecessary burden for you."

"I don't care. Happens all the time . . . but you've certainly dealt with your own fair share of nuisances, haven't you?" She sounded more amazed than concerned. "You're like the man of a thousand disasters. So what about that girl? Based on what the authorities were saying, it sounds like she was involved as well."

"Well, in a manner of speaking . . ."

"Gotcha," she nodded. "Well, then, how do you intend on thanking me?"

"I'll treat you to tea."

This was literally an invitation to go have real tea at a teahouse, not just a regular coffee shop. It was sort of a Kyoto thing, or maybe just a Miiko-san thing.

"Does that come with *dango*?" *Dango*—those tasty rice flour dumplings—went really well with green tea.

"It even comes with *hiyashi shiruko*." Yes, and sweet red bean soup, too!

"Where at?"

"The Oharame-ya in Gion."

Miiko-san's eyes immediately lit up. "Hold on, I'll get ready."

She shut the door. For what it was worth, she was considerate enough to change into normal clothes if she was going out with somebody else. That level of thoughtfulness made her a pretty rare specimen in my circle of acquaintances.

"And I'm back." A minute later she was ready to leave. She handed me a car key. I flipped it over once in the palm of my hand before clutching it tight.

4

And so eight o'clock in the evening rolled around. Tea with Miiko-san had ended and I found myself walking between Shijô and Oike on Kawara-machi Street. Miiko-san had already driven her Fiat back to her apartment.

"Don't use me just to kill time and save on shoe leather." Those were the words she had left me with.

She could see right through me, all right. Miiko-san was sharp, all right. But you had to hand it to her for accepting my invitation anyway. She was a nice girl. Or maybe she just had a sweet tooth.

I came to a stop and entered a nearby karaoke spot.

"Welcome," the guy behind the counter said. "Party of one?"

"Umm, I have a friend who should already be here."

"May I have your friend's name, please?"

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"Ah, Zerozaki-sama?"

He briefly entered something into his computer. "Okay, that would be room twenty-four," he said, flashing me a customer-servicey smile. I said my thanks and made my way to the elevator. Room twenty-four was on the second floor. I got off there and walked down the hall, checking the number of each room.

"*Dadadadadada dadadadadadadada! Dadadada! Dadadadada-dadadadadadadadadadada! Ah! Aaaahhhh!*"

Just as I was wondering who was the bozo with the rusty pipes, I realized it was coming from room twenty-four. I gave a little shrug and opened the door without even knocking.

"Wha?"

Zerozaki stopped his belting once he noticed me.

"Yo, Damaged Goods," he said, waving a finger at me. I entered the room without reacting and took a seat on the sofa.

"Hey, Human Failure," I said.

He placed down the microphone and used the remote control to end the song.

"You can keep singing if you want. You're paying for this, right?"

"Nah, it's okay. I'm not really all that into singing, to be honest. And I sure as hell don't like imitating other singers. I just do it to kill time."

He sat down so that he was facing me and sighed deeply.

"Haven't seen ya for a day. But, like, it don't really feel that way."

"Eh, I guess not." I nodded.

To be honest, I was surprised. Until a moment ago, I didn't even think Zerozaki would be here. Sure, after our conversation the day before yesterday—I mean, yesterday morning—we'd arranged to meet again. "I'll be at the karaoke joint, so

let's meet up there," he had said. But I didn't think he would actually show up. I guess he probably thought the same thing. And that was no doubt the reason that I *had* come and the reason he *was* here waiting.

The meaning of the phrase *used to waiting*: Here too lay a justified contradiction.

From there, we began talking about a variety of things, none of which mattered in the least. It was just like the night we had first crossed paths. Ridiculous philosophy, boring facts of enlightenment, irrelevant views on life. At times we veered off-track a bit and got into discussions on music ("Guess the one-hit wonder") or literature ("What's the trick to truly moving your reader?"). None of it had any real point. It was as if we were both just trying to check something.

"Say, Zerozaki," I said somewhere around the four-hour mark. "What's it feel like to kill someone?"

"Huh?" he said, tilting his head at me. His face looked blank, as if he hadn't been thinking of anything in particular. "It's not really the kind of thing that makes you feel this way or that. I don't really feel much of anything."

"You don't? It doesn't feel good or refreshing or anything like that?"

"Listen, dumbass, what do you think I am, some kind of sicko?" he said with a heaping helping of condescension. Committing grisly murders sure seemed like a funny way of *not* being a sicko, but I decided to hear him out.

" 'Cuz, you see, it's like this. I mean, I *am* a murderer. But I'm not what you would call a 'lust murderer.' That's a tricky distinction to make. I guess it doesn't do any good for me to make that kind of claim myself anyway. In the end, it's the

people around you who decide who you are. All I can do is go along with it. I'm not really one for deep thoughts, you know."

"Huh . . . yeah, I guess not. Okay, then how about I change my question—what is murder to you?"

"Nothin'."

I could find two meanings buried in that word.

It was worth nothing.

And therefore, it cost nothing.

"Now here's a question for *you*, D.G. What is death to you?"

"When you flat-out ask me like that, I'm at a loss. If I had to answer, I guess I'd say it's kind of like a battery running out of juice."

"A battery? You mean like with the AA and stuff?"

"Yeah. Well, something like that. I guess you could say battery power is like a life force or something. Which I guess would make you and your body the insulator."

"I've been called worse," he said with a little laugh. He seemed to be truly enjoying himself. I wondered if I sounded like him when I laughed.

"I guess my question was ambiguous," I said. "How about this, then? Do you understand why other people commit murder?"

"Huh? That's a bizarre one. But very *you* somehow. Let's see . . . nope."

"You don't?" I asked.

"Well, first of all, I don't understand other people, period. Whether or not they're killers, and regardless of how evil they may or may not be. Second of all, I don't even understand myself. I have no freaking idea what causes all that chaos and

confusion swirling around in my guts. So all I can say is no, I don't understand people who kill others."

"I see your logic there."

"I might add that murder was never particularly what I was going for," he said as if it really was just an afterthought.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, this is going to get awfully conceptual, but in other words . . . well, here's an example." He picked up the receiver for the room phone. "Excuse me, could we get two ramens please?"

Not much later, a staff member came in carrying ramen.

"Eat up. I'm payin'," he said, and took some noodles with his chopsticks. "Now *this* is a meal."

"Yup. You didn't even have to tell me."

"They say food, sleep, and sex are the three basic desires of mankind. But why are we eating this meal right now?"

"To ingest vitamins."

"Yes. Without vitamins, people die. And thus eating food brings pleasure. Sleeping feels good, too, and sex, well, that's obvious. Anything that you have to do to stay alive always comes with pleasure."

"Sure. That's easy enough to understand. So?"

"Don't rush me. 'So? So? So?' You sound like Akutagawa Ryu-freaking-nosuke."

"Huh? Wasn't that Dazai's thing?"

"It was Akutagawa, dammit. Dazai wrote about it in an anecdote on Akutagawa."

Whichever literary figure it was, I decided to once again do as told and hear him out. He paused for a moment before speaking, as if to build up the suspense.

"Now let's imagine someone who's obsessed with eating. In other words, someone who eats not simply to take in vitamins, but because he's mad for the sensation of eating itself; for the beauty in the very act. The stimulation of his taste buds. The pleasure of feeling the food pass through his mouth. The joy of mastication. The ecstasy of feeling that mushed-up gook flowing down his throat. The feeling of fullness nearly destroying his satiety center altogether. The euphoria taking over his brain. In other words, I'm talking about a fat guy," he said, laughing. 'To a guy like that, vitamins or lack thereof are totally irrelevant. The means and the end have switched places for him, so that his main goal is something subsidiary. Now there's your problem. Can you still say this guy is eating? No, don't answer. You and I both know the only possible answer is no. What this guy is doing isn't eating. He's just eating the *concept* of eating."

"And you're just killing the concept of killing? That's a bit of a stretch," I said with a shrug. "It's pretty perverse to try to equate a natural appetite for food with the urge to kill. Are you sure you don't just have your priorities mixed up? Maybe you're mistaking killing for something else."

"Ehh, that's a tough one. It's hard to say. I'll say it again, man—the act of killing itself was never my intention, nor was the stuff that comes afterward. Y'know, the dismemberment."

Then what the hell is your intention? Man, you're a tough guy to understand."

"Not as much as you. I mean, I know that I'm hard to understand. I just said that. Anyway, in the beginning, I thought I was in it for the thrill."

"The thrill," I said.

"Yeah. You've heard of 'high risk, high return' before, right? In Japanese, I think we say, 'If you don't go into the tiger's den, you don't get no cub.' With murder, the risk is high, but the return is low, right? It hardly seems worth it. It's stupid. That's why most murders are almost always cases of people 'going too far' or 'using too much force.' They're not *trying* to kill the person, but before they know it, they've gone and done it. However . . ."

He pulled a rather dangerous-looking blade from his vest pocket. "This here is what they call a dagger. You grip it in your fist like this. So the first person I killed, I stuck this thing in his carotid artery and just tugged it to the side. This was an inexplicable act of murder. I had no particular intention of causing the person suffering or pain. In fact, it was a rather pleasant way to die, if you ask me. Now let me just say right now that by no means was this a boastful act. I'm sure you know this, but acts spurred by one's pride are the most pathetic actions a person can take. People who take pride in causing harm are the lowest of the low. I'm just boasting about my faults here. Seriously, all joking aside, that's the only kind of murder I can perform. Even when I went after you, on the other side of the mirror."

"Huh. You don't say."

"I do say. Like, let's imagine that you and I ended up fighting to the death again. Of course, logically speaking, it's entirely possible that you would kill me. But in the one time that you could kill me, I could kill you nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine times. Well, in reality you and I each only have one life, but this is a metaphor. At any rate, I can only kill for the sake of killing. In other words, I can affirm that the

eight people I've killed up until now were not victims of me 'going too far.' "

Eight people. In two days, the body count had risen by two. Well, I guess you could say that Zerozaki had gone about living his life while I had been living mine.

"So am I an idiot? Maybe. After all, it's not like I'm getting anything out of killing these people. Well no, I guess I am getting *something*. Whatever's in their wallets," he said.

One of the alarming details of the prowler case had been that the victims' money and valuables had been stolen. This was a rare thing in cases like this, in which the murders seemed to have been committed for the thrill of it, but the reason was simply that Zerozaki needed the money to support his homeless lifestyle.

Even his karaoke money was probably coming out of one of those victims' wallets. If you looked at it that way, even this ramen was tainted with sin, I thought as I slurped my noodles.

"But you could get that stuff just by working a normal job, so it's no reason to commit murder. If you think about the effort that goes into killing one person, it makes a lot more sense to just spend the day working somewhere instead. And yet I choose murder. And therein lies my whole theory."

"Ah, I get it. In other words, to Zerozaki Hitoshiki, the risk *is* the return."

"Yup. The means and the end aren't just swapped, but unified. The act itself is the purpose. The purpose is the act. The act is complete when you've carried out that purpose. This is actually not a bad theory at all."

"But how is that any different from just losing sight of your purpose? It's like having a guy who loves to read, so he fills his room with books until it's completely buried in them. But he

still keeps buying new ones. Whether he buys books or not is up to him, but he's got so many books in his room now that even if he spent his whole life reading them, he'd never get through them all. But he just keeps on buying and buying."

"Hmm. Ahhh, ah-ah-ah, I get it I get it. You're talking about processing capacity. Once you've surpassed your processing capacity, means and end become one and the same. It's like Ishikawa Goemon said: 'A splendid view, a splendid view, even a thousand pieces of gold is too little to pay for the beautiful sights of spring. I, Goemon, am worth ten thousand ryô.' Hmm. Yeah, maybe so," he said with an impressed sigh as he reclined into the sofa. "But you know, my man, even if that is the case, it doesn't have much to do with me. You know why? Because that theory I've been talking about is so totally wrong to begin with. Risk equals return? Now there's a bullshit equation if I've ever heard one. I'm just having fun with logic here."

"Huh. So what are you getting at?"

"Well, this story is a little generic," he said, leaning forward. "But let's go back to when I was just a little brat. You were a little brat once too, huh? Well so was I. What kind of brat was I? Well, I wasn't particularly weird or anything. I even believed in God. If I got smacked, it hurt. If I saw someone else get smacked, it hurt. I had all your average sensibilities. I wanted to bring happiness to the people near me. I knew gratitude. I knew unconditional affection for another human being. That's the kind of little brat I was. . . . But sometimes, I would just sit. Not to read a book or watch TV or something. I would just sit. I'd be there resting my chin in my hands, my mind up in la-la land, just sitting there. Sooner or later I realized that during these times, I would always

naturally start pondering how one kills a human being. The first time I realized what I was doing, I was seriously freaked out. I mean, I was pondering, *examining* how you kill a person as if it was the most normal thing in the world. The idea that this was really *me* was the scariest thing," he said.

"So it was something you discovered in yourself. But what part of this story is supposed to be generic? It seems pretty out there to me. You're saying that from birth, you've had an innate proclivity to murder?"

"I said don't rush me. I thought that once myself, but that's not the case at all. I thought I was born with a murderous mindset, with the urge to kill. But that's not it. It's that—and this is where it gets generic—I'm attached to a rail."

"A rail? What are you talking about?"

"It's a metaphor. You hear it a lot. People talk about *life on a track*, right? You go through middle school, you go through high school, you go through college, you enter society, you support yourself with a salary so that you can bag a lover, and then you depart from the world. That's the track of life. Well, similarly to that, I'm on the murderer's track."

"Sounds more like you're *off* the track to me."

"Like you're one to talk. Anyway, that's not important. The kind of track I'm talking about here isn't necessarily the one set up by society. It might be a track you've set for yourself. Like, imagine there's a kid who becomes obsessed with Ichiro in elementary school and decides he wants to be a baseball player. In that moment, he *makes* a track for himself."

"I see. So that means we're all on a track . . . except for people who 'drop out,' I suppose."

Except for people who have suffered a fatal blow.

Except for people who go off the rails.

"Yup. I don't know who laid down this track for me. I might have done it myself. Someone else might have. But one thing I know for sure is that I've taken the track too far. I've made it too far down without suffering that fatal blow, and now there's no stopping me. I can't even entertain the idea of putting on the brakes."

"Aha. So it just keeps going on and on."

In other words, right now, he was in motion. And the him in midmotion was entirely different from the him who had first started running along this track.

"Yup. It's like a curse from the past. And in my case, it's slowly killing me. It may sound boring living life on a track someone else has laid out, but you know, it doesn't make any difference *who* laid it out if it if you get sick of it midway through. Not that I could just quit at this point. Too many strings attached now."

"Must be even tougher not having anyone to blame."

"That's right. Especially for an outcast like me."

"Might as well give it up. You may not break away from the track, but you sure do break away from the rules."

"Oh? Well you're no Mother Teresa yourself, you know."

"But I *am* a serious student at a university. I'm not like you."

"Doesn't saying that depress you? It's like looking into the mirror and saying, 'Who the hell are you?' "

"Exactly," I said nodding.

"Anyway, it's for that reason that I don't view myself as a murderer. Because killing isn't my goal. You've heard of people who 'kill like it's as simple as breathing,' right? Well, for me, if I don't kill, it becomes hard to breathe. I'm just paying the train fare for this track I got on long ago. Or it's like I'm

perpetually repaying a loan. You could say I'm killing the act of killing."

"This is all becoming a little too idealistic and abstract for me. Can't you put it more realistically?"

"Not really. I mean, we're talking about a vague concept here. If you put it in realistic terms, the conversation would be over with 'I killed and dismembered someone times eight.' "

"That's true . . ." I sighed and looked up at the ceiling. Talking with Zerozaki was interesting enough, and I had even learned a thing or two, I suppose, but it wasn't exactly useful information. "Hmm. And here I thought a killer like you would be the one most capable of *understanding* the heart of a killer."

Maybe I'd been wrong to assume that. After all, Zerozaki's MO and Tomo-chan's cause of death were completely different. I didn't believe for a second that Sasaki-san had given me the whole scoop, but she had at least told me that Tomo-chan had been strangled with a thin piece of cloth. Meanwhile, Zerozaki was cutting people up with a knife. The similarities began and ended with the fact that both killers had brought death to their victims.

Zerozaki killed people at random.

Tomo-chan's killer had sought her out. It was most likely the result of a grudge. Something spurred by a sticky, slimy, disgusting personal relationship that had eroded away.

"Hah? Why do you say that?" he said.

"Well, it's just that a classmate from my university was murdered recently."

"Murdered? Your classmate?"

"That's what I said. Yeah, at first, I wondered if you had done it, but it doesn't match your style at all. They strangled her with a piece of cloth."

"Ah, yeah, that's not my thing," he said, waving his hands with a grimace.

"So I thought. But I just figured one monster would understand another."

"You're mistaken. And it's such a *you* mistake. Monsters don't kill people; people do. And just as people don't understand monsters' feelings, monsters don't understand people's. It's like comparing a platypus to the archaeopteryx."

I didn't know who was supposed to be the platypus and who the archaeopteryx, but he was probably right. Guys like Zerozaki were peculiar and dysfunctional, and that was why they were so rare.

"So, what happened, then?" he said, sounding not particularly interested. Figuring there was no need to keep it a secret, I proceeded to tell him everything I had heard from Sasaki-san. I told him about Mikoko-chan, Tomo-chan, Muimi-chan, and Akiharu-kun and about the birthday party. He occasionally dropped in a brief remark or shook his head as he tried to follow along with the story's twists and turns, and just once, he even flashed a look of concern.

"Hmm," he said when I was finished. "I see. I see I see I see. So that's how it went down. So?"

"What do you mean *so*?"

"*So* means *so*." He stared me directly in the eye. I didn't answer him. This silence continued for a whole hour.

"Okay, I got it," he eventually said, standing to his feet. "Let's go."

"Huh? Where?"

"To Emoto's place," he said like with all the casualness of a good friend inviting someone over to hang out. With that, he made his exit. This was all going just as I had expected, I thought. I rose from the sofa and followed him out, leaving our half-eaten ramen behind.

5

"But about that Aoii chick," Zerozaki said apathetically as we walked westward down Shijô Street. "Seems pretty obvious that she's got the hots for you."

"What?" I couldn't help but be surprised by this sudden leap in our discussion.

It was already past midnight, meaning it was now Monday, the sixteenth. Even on Shijô Street, which was a major east-west road, traffic had grown sparse. Occasionally we passed a group of college students probably coming home after a night of drinking, but the sidewalks were otherwise mostly empty.

I realized that the next day I had to go to school. And from first period, no less. What's more, it was my foreign language class, where they always took attendance. And it looked to me like this was going to be another all-nighter.

"Eh, what were we talking about again?"

"That Aoii chick," he said irritably, knitting his brow at me. "Hearing what you have to say about her, she's got to have a thing for you."

"No way. What could've possibly given you a dumb idea like that? That doesn't even sound like something you would say. I mean, she's already got a boyfriend anyway."

"No, she doesn't."

"Oh wait, that's right." Come to think of it, she may or may not have told me that. "But still. I don't think that's the case. I mean she does seem to be fond of me, but it's like how people are fond of animals. And even then, she probably sees me as an iguana or something in the reptile family. You know, like 'Aw, that's . . . *kind of* cute.' "

"An iguana? If you're an iguana, then that makes me a chameleon," he said, and proceeded to laugh. "For example," he then said, immediately switching back to his serious tone. "She knew your address, right? That's extremely suspicious right there. Who bothers looking up the address of someone they don't even have a crush on?"

"She didn't even have to. It was in the address log from class."

"Aha. You said it yourself, man. You were on vacation when class started and you missed the first week of your . . . general education, was it? Whatever that class was. Hence, there was no way your address could've been recorded in that log."

"Oh."

Now there was an oversight. I certainly didn't remember telling my address to anyone else, and that meant there was no way the address of my ancient ruin of an apartment building could've been on the sheet. There wasn't a single person at Rokumeikan who should've known where I lived.

"But Mikoko-chan claimed she got it off the address list. Was it just a misunderstanding? But misunderstandings like that don't happen, do they? So maybe she lied to me."

"Eh, not so much a lie as an excuse. She probably followed you home one day."

"If she'd been following me, I would've noticed."

"Maybe. At any rate, she probably learned your address through fairly illegitimate means. She couldn't tell you the truth, so she just blurted out that thing about the address log."

"Uh-huh."

"So let's think about this. Have you ever met a girl who would go that far just to learn the address of some random guy? You might not put it past a guy, but we're talking about a girl here." He flashed an unsavory smile.

I let out a sigh of a laugh. "Don't act like you know what's going on."

"What can I say, it's who I am."

"But I really think you're wrong about this. I can say that for certain."

"Well, I'll be damned. And what are you basing this certainty on?"

"Well, she acts like she hates me."

"*Huh*?" Zerozaki's facial expression alone was enough to make it clear that he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Come on now, at least remember the stuff you said *yourself*. You just said Aoii was fond of you, didn't you? So what the hell are you squawking about now?"

"Hang on, this isn't a contradiction. I have sort of a dualistic or Boolean view of the world. Shall I explain? In other words . . . like, take the cars on this road. Let's say there's a car going twenty-five miles per hour."

"Yeah. You want me to tell you if that's fast or slow?"

"Yeah. Which do you think?"

"It's slow, isn't it? At this time of night they could go faster than that."

"Okay, then let's imagine the same car going at full speed. I don't know much about the limitations of automobiles, but

let's just say it's going one hundred miles per hour at full throttle. Is that fast?"

"Fast works for me."

"Finally, let's imagine the car when it's at rest. How about this time?"

He gave a restless shrug. "It's at rest. What the hell do *you* think?"

"Just humor me."

"Well, slow, I guess. You sure can't call something that's not moving fast."

"That's right. Now let's go back to the initial question—is twenty-five miles per hour slow or fast? I would express it like this: 'It's twenty-five fast and seventy-five slow.' "

"Ahh." He gave a convinced nod. The cheek on the tattooed side of his face curled up into a slight smirk. "So the way you see it, what does Aoii think of you?"

"Well, to give an approximation, she likes me seventy and hates me fifty. Approximately."

"I guess that doesn't add up to her liking you twenty."

Indeed. The logic of arithmetical operations didn't apply when it came to human emotions. Besides, these numbers were highly prone to fluctuate, making such calculations troublesome. They could only be expressed as averaged values.

"Okay, so what about you, now?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"You. How much do you like and hate Aoii?"

"I like her zero and hate her zero."

"Whoa . . ." He pulled back a bit in surprise. "My God, man . . . you're brutal."

"You should talk."

"Cram it, Captain Passive."

I liked her zero and hated her zero. You might call it apathy.

Sure, my words might have been a little exaggerated and laced with apathy, but that didn't mean I wasn't telling the truth.

Because after all, I'm such a cold, dried-out person that I can kill a person just by living. Indeed, I was as brutal as Zerozaki made me out to be. I simply couldn't take any type of assertive action for the sake of a stranger.

"This is totally . . ."

"Totally."

"A masterpiece," Zerozaki said, laughing.

"Nonsense." I didn't laugh.

"Well, putting all that textbook mumbo-jumbo aside, don't you have the hots for anyone?"

"Huh. I don't really know."

"Even though they're your emotions?"

"*Because* they're my emotions."

"Ah, I get it. Because you're the passive spectator. You understand other people better than you understand yourself. I guess they say you can't be your own observer. It's like that thing . . . what was it again? The uncertainty principle? Quantum mechanics? Doppelgänger's cat?"

" 'Doppelgänger' can't be right."

"Ahh, who was it? It's math, so it's gotta be a German guy, but . . ."

After that mildly racist remark, he sat and thought to himself for a minute. But ultimately, he couldn't seem to recall whose cat it was. "Goddammit," he said, slapping himself in the left cheek. This seemed to relieve him.

"Well then," he said. "Here's my conclusion: You've got a fucking terrible attitude."

"That's probably correct. But. . ."

But.

What could I possibly have intended to follow that up with? Might I have been considering saying somebody's name? Of course I was. But whose name that could've been, I don't know.

"It's all just nonsense in the end."

"Um, is that supposed to be, like, your escape line?" He slumped his entire upper body dramatically as if my incredibly delayed response had completely knocked the wind out of him. Though not to the same extent as Mikoko-chan, it seemed Zerozaki was also one for big reactions.

"Eh, then again, I guess I'm kind of like that too. Or rather, I *am* like that," he said.

We arrived at the Nishiôji-Shijô intersection. The Hankyû Saiin Station was visible to the south. Of course, the final train had long since made its stops, and the area surrounding the station was desolate. We turned north. If we continued up as far as Maruta-machi, we'd arrive at Tomo-chan's apartment.

"Maybe we should've hailed a cab after all. We're still only halfway there."

"It's a waste of money. That is to say, I don't *have* any money. Or were you going to pay?"

"Nope. There isn't a single student in Kyoto who rides in cabs."

"Huh. I'm not a student, so I wouldn't know."

Suddenly a doubt rose in my mind. I thought of Sasaki-san's stern gaze for some reason as I asked Zerozaki my question.

"Are you on a most-wanted list or anything?"

"I don't think so. Nobody's ever tried to talk to me, and nobody's ever followed me. I've done my share of following other people, though," he boasted. It amazed me that someone who stood out this much—I mean, he had a tattoo running down half his face; maybe that kind of thing was normal in Tokyo, but he was probably the only one of his kind in all of Kyoto—hadn't been arrested yet. But then again, if you thought about it, whether he stood out or not probably didn't make much of a difference in a case like this.

"So we're going to Emoto's place from here, right? But . . ."

"What?"

"In reality, you can already pretty much deduce what happened, right? I mean, who the killer is and stuff."

"Deduce?" I parroted his word back at him. Could I really figure out the answer based only what I knew at this point?

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I mean it when I say I don't really know what happened. I'm not some mystery novel or movie . . ."

Detective.

The redheaded private contractor.

"Detective."

"Well, of course not," he said with surprising plainness. "But I guess I also mean it when I say that I don't think it's beyond figuring out. She was strangled to death. Inside a room. The estimated time of death leaves a fairly narrow window. The suspects all have alibis. We just need a few more clues."

And it just so happened that I currently had Kunagisa collecting that very thing. And I myself was on my way to do the same.

"Is it possible that it was just a random robbery?"

"Well, technically it's possible, but the cops don't seem to think that's the case."

There was something very unordinary about both Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san. It was hard to believe they were the kind of people who would be sent out just to handle a simple burglary-homicide case. Of course, that was just my hunch.

"Mmm." Zerozaki's eyes drooped lazily. "But I don't think you really have to go out of your way to investigate things. Is there some logical reason for doing this?"

"Not especially. Listen, nobody's making you come along. Why don't you go cut up some more people?"

"Nah, that's okay. I'm not in the mood for that tonight." He took my suggestion more seriously than I had intended. "Besides, I was the one who suggested we go in the first place."

Meanwhile, we'd arrived at Tomo-chan's apartment building. Apparently the police had already checked out, leaving the area as desolate as the train station. We made our way through the automatic door and into the main lobby.

Now then.

"Ah, right. You need an autolock card key to get in."

"What now?"

"Here's what we do." I walked a step ahead of Zerozaki and entered a random room number into the intercom.

"Hello?"

"Um, this is the person from room three oh two. I'm so sorry to bother you, but I went and locked my own card in the room. Would you mind opening the door for me?"

"Oh, certainly."

K-chunk, the glass door said as it opened up.

"Thank you," I said to the complete stranger, and Zerozaki and I quickly made our way into the building.

"You don't mind lying just like that, huh?" he said.

"What can I say, it's who I am."

We got into the elevator and went up to the sixth floor. As we walked down the sixth floor hall, I produced some thin white gloves from my pocket and slid them onto my hands.

"Not to make this awkward, but . . . were you prepared with those gloves this whole time?"

"Yup. I planned this whole thing."

"Wow," he said as he pulled his own pair of gloves out of his vest pocket and switched them with the fingerless ones he was currently wearing. Of course, a guy like him probably just carried gloves around with him every day.

We arrived in front of Tomo-chan's room. When I tried the knob, the door turned out to be locked, as expected.

"So how do you propose we clear this one?"

"Actually, I hadn't thought about it. Any ideas?"

"I gotcha," he grumbled, pulling a thin knife from his vest pocket. Or perhaps *drill* was a more accurate word for it. He jammed it into the keyhole. He rattled it left and right until we heard the click of something settling into place. Then he pulled the knife back out, spun it around once in his hand, and closed it back up in his vest.

He turned the knob. "It's open."

"This can't be safe, can it?"

"Not even a little bit. The killer could be anywhere."

We shrugged and went in anyway.

We walked down the hall between the kitchen and bathroom, and passed through the door at the end. The room hadn't changed much from my Saturday visit. It looked like some things had been slightly moved around, but that was probably owed to the crime-scene investigation.

And then there was the center of the room. White strips of tape formed the shape of a person.

"Wow," Zerozaki said with awe. "So they really do that. It's like something out of a TV show or a manga. Hey, that Emoto girl had about the same build as me."

"Looks like it."

Tomo-chan was pretty small, even for a girl, but for a guy, Zerozaki was ridiculously petite. They weren't *exactly* the same size, but they could've easily fit each other's clothing.

"Incidentally, I prefer tall girls," he said.

"Really?"

"Yup. But tall girls don't like short guys, do they?"

"But none of your six victims were tall girls."

"Who goes around killing the girls he's into, idiot?" he said angrily. It looked like I had touched on a difficult subject.

Nevertheless.

My gaze fell back on the tape on the floor. Tomo-chan must have been strangled and then collapsed on the floor here in this position, asphyxiated. But this tape hardly captured the reality of it.

I looked back over at Zerozaki to find him immersed in silent prayer. His eyes were closed, with his hands pressed together in front of his chest.

I deliberated for a moment before deciding to do likewise.

Afterward, I once again began inspecting the area around the tape.

"Hm."

There was something on the right hand of the human shape. It was dark, so I couldn't see it very well, but we couldn't just go turning on the light, either. I managed to make out a small ring made out of black tape.

It seemed this was some sort of mark they had made during the investigation.

"What's this? Maybe something was on the floor here?"

"No, look closer," Zerozaki said, crouching down next to me. "Something's written here."

"Dammit, I wish we had a little more light."

"Just wait a little longer. Your eyes'll adjust soon enough."

It assumed that we were working at our leisure here, but right now that was our only option.

In time, my eyes did begin to adjust.

Thin carpet. On its surface there were red letters.

"*x* over *y*?" we both said.

The letter *x* was written in cursive handwriting. Then a diagonal line below it. Then the letter *y* in the same cursive handwriting. It was messy writing, so you had to struggle to make it out. But it didn't seem like it could've said anything else.

"What's *x* over *y*?"

"Beats me."

"Is it red because it's written in blood?"

"Nah, seems to be some kind of oil-based ink."

Strange writing next to the body's right hand. Could this have been her dying message?

"But hey, we don't actually know that this is the right hand. We can't tell if the body was faceup or facedown just by looking at this tape."

"Ah, right. But, Zerozaki, I don't think she could've written this if she was facedown. Not that *she* was necessarily the one who wrote it."

"Yeah, that's right. There's still the possibility that the killer wrote it. So what's this *x* over *y* bullshit all about? Math? But this isn't an equation. You can't take it any further than this."

"Maybe whoever wrote it didn't finish."

"If that's the case, we're pretty much at a dead end. I can't even imagine what they were getting at with this," he said as he walked over to a comer of the room and slid down against the wall. "I'm sleepy," he said with a big yawn. "Figure anything out?"

"Just the fact that this may or may not have been her dying message is a pretty good haul. Now, then . . ."

I scanned my eyes around the room. There were no signs of a struggle. As far as I could see, nothing was broken or missing.

"Yeah, I don't think this was just a burglary," I said. Was it all because of a grudge after all? But what could a girl who had just turned twenty years old two days ago have done to have inspired such hatred?

I continued examining the room as I pondered. Of course, the police had probably already done this with complete thoroughness, but right now it was necessary to see the crime scene with my own eyes, in order to fill in the gaps in my imagination. For later on.

"What now?" Zerozaki said as he watched me moving around. Judging from his current state, it didn't look like he intended to help me any further. Not that I was expecting him to do anything. I'm not such an idealist that I would expect anything from a mere water reflection.

"You seem strangely comfortable doing all this," he said.

"Well, I've got experience."

"What could a *twenty-year-old* have possibly experienced in his life to have broken him so badly as a human being? I can't even imagine," he said.

"You should talk. But I guess I'll humor you anyway. I guess you could say I haven't lived a very respectable life. Or no, my life has been plenty respectable, but I haven't been."

"Hmm. You know, I don't like myself very much," he said plainly to my back. "But seeing you, I realize I'm not so bad."

"You took the words right out of my mouth. I may be a screwup, but I'm not as bad as you. When I look at it that way, it's kind of a relief."

"I wonder."

"*I* wonder."

"Say . . . why do people die anyway?" he asked.

"Because you kill them."

"Well, yeah, but I mean aside from that. Umm, what is it again? Apoptosis? Darwinism? Genes? Cancer cells? Cell suicide? All that good stuff. It's like the termination point of our functionality."

"Come to think of it, I heard once that the longest a human can live is somewhere around one hundred ten years, regardless of the era or region."

"Huh."

"I mean, the bottom line is that living creatures have a lot of diversity. But you know, whether you live a long time or not doesn't really make a difference. I don't really think there's even much point in living two hundred or three hundred years. I've lived for nineteen years and two months up until now, but quite frankly. I've had enough."

"You're tired of it?" he asked.

"Well, it's more like I just can't endure it anymore. I'm still okay for now, I guess, but if things go on like this . . . yeah, in another two or three years, my ability to process reality will have reached its limit."

"But isn't that just one of those things? Like, I'll bet you thought the same thing when you were fourteen, right? Like, 'in another few years I'll probably have committed suicide.' "

"Yeah, I did think that. But I didn't have the balls to go through with it."

"Chicken."

"Yeah, well. I always wanted to be a bird."

"Not a chicken, I bet. They can't even fly."

"I'm joking. But I do think this: There isn't a person on this earth who's lived for ten or twenty years without pondering God and death, unless he's just some slaphappy nut."

"God and death, huh?"

"Yeah. But before he can contemplate those things, he has to have learned about life. Some knowledge of life is necessary in order to contemplate death, so you have to study life before you can even begin to think about the fact that it will one day end. It's like that saying: 'If you want to kill someone, your victim had to have been alive to start with.' No matter how much effort I might exert, I can't kill John Lennon."

Nor could I kill Emoto Tomoe.

"Now tell me, Zerozaki. What does it mean to be alive?"

"That your heart's still beating?" he said off the top of his head.

"Wrong," I answered. "Showing signs of life and being alive are not the same thing. But that aside, what if there existed a person who had experienced death *before* life? What kind of human being would he turn out to be? Could we even call him a human being? A living creature who could reminisce about his own passing, who had mourned his own death before life even began. What would we label such an existence?"

"I guess that would be Death himself. It would have to be, or else . . ." His eyes seemed to be searching for the right words. He pointed a finger at me with an awkward look on his face. No words came out. To be sure, they probably didn't need to.

"Eh, it's just another mind-over-matter thing," I surmised.

An escape line.

"Say, man. I know I already asked, but *is* there some reason you've gone to all this trouble—I mean, illegally entering her apartment, not to mention the fact that you're supposed to be the passive observer type—just to gather information about the murder?"

"Yeah, there is," I answered. I meant to say *no*, but for some reason a confirmation leapt out of my mouth. I wasn't sure which one I really meant.

"Huh . . . you said yourself that you don't like or dislike Aoii, right? Then why should you do anything for her? And it seems to me that you only met those other three through her, like little add-ons."

He slapped his hands together as if he had just thought of something. "Is it for Emoto Tomoe?"

Tomo-chan.

A tragic figure, brutally murdered just after celebrating her own birthday.

That alone wouldn't have moved me, normally. If starving children on the other side of the world were being shot to death, I wouldn't have thought anything of it. If some giant earthquake in some faraway country killed tens of thousands of people, I wouldn't feel a thing. Whether or not a string of murders occurred in the town where I lived, it was no matter to me. I just didn't have that kind of spirit; it wasn't much more to imagine that I wouldn't feel much sadness or despair over the passing of even a nearby acquaintance.

However, there were always exceptions.

"I was hoping I'd get to talk to Emoto Tomoe just a little more."

Zerozaki said nothing to this.

"That's all, though, really."

"I see," he nodded. "Well, whatever the case, what we have here is a masterpiece for sure."

Indeed, he was right that there seemed to be no compelling reason for me to go to all this trouble. It wasn't like I was being somebody else, but it certainly wasn't my usual style.

I realized I was being stupid. I just didn't think I was wrong.

"Ahh," Zerozaki yawned again.

"If you're bored, you can go." That is to say, *get lost*.

But he shook his head. "It's okay. Besides, how are you planning to lock up without me?"

"Actually, I've got one of those things that allows you to lock the door without the key."

"That's a pretty useless device."

Of course, I was joking.

Zerozaki soon closed his eyes and began to doze off. It was like watching my own sleeping face, which was a bizarre, alien sensation, to say the least. I continued examining Tomo-chan's room until four in the morning, but didn't come up with anything that seemed like a decent lead.

"But . . ."

Maybe it didn't matter anyway. In fact, halfway through, I had entirely lost my will to search for clues and spent the rest of the time staring down at the tape human.

And I reminisced. About the time I had spent here on Saturday night. That wild, ridiculous night during which we'd all left reason and rational thought behind.

If I could be allowed to say something a bit romantic, perhaps this was my memorial to Tomo-chan. Now *that* wasn't my style, to be sure, but it seemed like a good enough reason all the same.

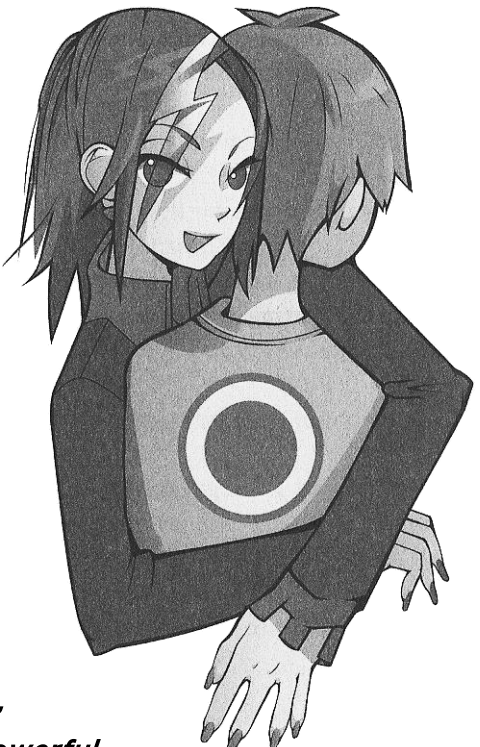
"Okay, let's go."

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay."

We left the building, and Zerozaki and I parted ways there. We spoke no parting words, and made no plans to meet again.



Aikawa Jun,
the most powerful
entrepreneur in the world.

4

RED VIOLENCE

Stress Through Transgressions

There ain't no meaning.
Got it.
Got it.
Got it.
Got it?

1

Wednesday, May eighteenth.

With second period over, the afternoon break had begun. Since the dining room got crowded at that time, I always skipped lunch on days when I had a second-period class. So I instead made my way directly to my general-education class.

General education.

Classmates.

Aoii Mikoko, Atemiya Muimi, Usami Akiharu, and Emoto Tomoe . . .

I hadn't seen a single one of these four people since the week began. This was no coincidence; most likely, not a single one of them had come to school. Being dead, Tomo-chan had her reasons, but the other three had neither died nor been murdered. Perhaps Tomo-chan's death was to blame for them not showing up, or perhaps this was just how college students behaved after Golden Week.

Things hadn't progressed any further. The pair of detectives—Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san—hadn't returned to visit my apartment again, I hadn't had any contact with my three classmates, and I was still waiting for news from Kunagisa. Naturally, I hadn't met with Zerozaki again either.

As someone who doesn't read the news or watch TV, I of course had no idea what kind of press (or lack thereof) Tomo-chan's death had attracted. Nor did I know if the prowler had struck again in the past three days.

It was something I had no desire to know.

Right now, I was only waiting. After all, that was one thing I was used to.

"Man, it's hot. . . . I wonder if I'm a slug," I muttered as I made my way across campus, from Meigaku Hall to Yôyô Hall. It was less than three hundred feet away, but it was a tough walk anyway. I had heard of boiling-hot climates before, but I didn't think they really existed. Neither Kobe nor Houston had been this bad. This was the kind of heat and body-soaking humidity unique to basin towns. I struggled to endure it as my legs carried me along. I climbed a staircase, which brought me directly to the second floor of Yôyô Hall. I went inside and at last took a moment to catch my breath.

Just then, I spotted somebody familiar. But it wasn't because she was familiar that I noticed her. Rather, it was that my eyes had been attracted to her against their better judgment by her flamboyantly hot-pink jersey. It didn't exactly blend into the surroundings.

That brown *sauvage*. If only she was crouching on the ground in front of a convenience store, the image would have been complete.

It was Atemiya Muimi-chan.

She was currently talking to some guy, probably a classmate. Thinking it would be a little obnoxious if I were to butt in and start up a conversation, I tried to slip by her unnoticed when she called out to me.

"Whoa, it's Ikkun," she said.

"Yo," her male associate greeted me informally. He had light brown hair and an easy-breezy kind of smile. Wait, who was this again? I didn't know anyone with this sort of easy-go-lucky surfer quality, did I? Was he from our general-education class?

"Long time no see, huh?" Muimi-chan said with a weak smile. "Umm . . . Geez, this is kind of awkward, huh? How have you been since it happened?"

"I've been coming to school as usual."

"Oh . . . heh, well, I guess *you* would." She smiled, but it seemed slightly forced. She appeared worn out, which probably wasn't forced.

"How about you?" I asked. "What've you been doing? I haven't seen you at school."

"Oh, well, how do you put it . . ." She couldn't seem to find the words. She probably didn't like the idea of exposing her weakness to others. I'm not that type of person myself, but her feelings weren't beyond my comprehension.

"Well, I've got to prepare for a presentation. Time to get outta here. See ya later," the guy said to us, and rushed off in the direction of the staircase.

"He's sure an energetic son of a bitch, huh?" Muimi-chan said we watched him take off. "He's totally lazy until an opportunity to be the center of attention comes along. Gen. Ed. ought to be a good show today. I'll be watching that bastard from the front row."

"Huh. So that guy is a classmate, then."

Muimi-chan stood frozen for a few seconds before slowly and stiffly turning her head toward me like her neck needed an oil change. I almost expected to hear it creaking.

"Don't tell me you forgot."

"Hm? Oh, I guess Mikoko-chan didn't tell you then, huh? I've got a pretty bad memory, so I don't really know who's in our class. I might remember him if I heard his name, though."

But she wouldn't tell me the guy's name. She was staring at me in shock for some reason.

At last, she opened her mouth. "Usami Akiharu."

"Oh."

There you had it.

This *was* shocking.

"Does he leave that little of an impression?" she said.

"Well, less than you, anyway. It's not like he goes around wearing hot pink jerseys."

That was what I wanted to say, but I stopped myself. Muimi-chan was the type of person who would probably really start hitting you once you made her mad. And I probably wouldn't get off with just a jab or two. If I teased her the way I teased Mikoko-chan, I'd be dead meat.

"It's my memory that's at fault here, that's all."

"If that's the case, then do something about it."

"Well, the weak impression thing may be an issue too. He's not as crazy as Mikoko-chan. I know a lot of eccentric people. Actually, that makes it sound like I know a lot of people. Correction: The only acquaintances I have are eccentric people, so normal people just slip right out of my mind."

"Normal people, huh?" She gave a wicked little laugh.

"What? Did I say something funny?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, I was just thinking, you're a surprisingly poor judge of character."

"Huh?"

"Akiharu's got a meaner personality than you think," she said in a way that seemed strangely meaningful as she stared off in the direction he had gone moments ago. "Well, you'll figure that out eventually . . . eventually." Something in her soft tone seemed to suggest her words had a deeper meaning, but a moment later her facial expression switched like someone had pressed a button on a remote. She turned my way again.

"This is perfect," she said. "I wanted to have a chat with you. Let's go talk in the lounge."

She began walking without waiting for my reply. After a short walk, we broke to the right, where we came upon the student lounge. I wondered if it would be crowded since it was the middle of the afternoon, but looking through the window glass I could see that, for some reason, fewer seats were occupied than empty. There was a plate hanging off the lounge door with *No Standing* written on it in red, Gothic letters. It was a prank a student had carried out several years back, and at this point nobody even bothered questioning it anymore. As a result, nobody bothered getting rid of it, either.

We entered the lounge, and Muimi-chan took a seat. The place was filled with cigarette smoke. Muimi-chan took one whiff and immediately reached into her pocket for something, but then stopped herself as if she had recalled her "policy" just in time. It was nice of her to stick to it so fastidiously, but in a place already this filled with smoke, it didn't really make much difference to me whether she smoked or not. But I knew that even if I told her she could, she would just say

something like, "No, it's my decision," so I took my seat without saying anything.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Don't play dumb. What's the one thing you and I would have to discuss?" she asked.

"Tomo-chan?"

"Mikoko."

She leaned forward with her arms on the table and glared up at me. But I wasn't so clueless that I wasn't prepared to meet her gaze.

"Have you seen Mikoko since then?"

"Since when?" I asked innocently.

"I told you not to play dumb. The police must have paid you a visit, too."

"Well, yeah . . ." I recalled my meeting with Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san, but to be honest, they weren't really a pair I wanted to think about too much. "So they visited you too?"

"Yeah. Kind of an unpleasant pair, weren't they?"

"A man and a woman?"

"Yeah. The guy looked like he belonged on *The X-Files*, and the lady looked like she paid regular visits to underground cells. Regular cops piss me off enough already, much less these two . . . uh, but that's another story," she said, righting her posture. "Yesterday was Tomoe's funeral." She looked at me in an accusatory fashion. "You didn't come."

"Well, nobody told me about it."

"Mikoko didn't come either. Akiharu and I went, though."

"Well, what can you do, right? Her death must've been a big shock to all of you," I said.

"Yeah, must've been. You make it sound like this doesn't have anything to do with you," she replied.

"It doesn't," I stopped myself from saying. Ah, the art of tact.

"You're not at all shocked by the fact that Tomoe was murdered?"

"Well, I was surprised enough when I first heard the news, but after three days, well, what do they call it? Cleaning out your heart's drawers? I mean, the past is just memories."

"As Tomoe's friend, I want to be pissed at you for saying that, but you're pretty much right, huh?" she said, a bit defeated. "I guess the human heart is conveniently constructed. Especially for someone who's thick-skinned like me. It's only been three days and I'm already back at the point where I can go to school again. But it really was devastating at first. I mean, I had just seen her, and then . . ." She snapped her fingers.

And then, silence. I wouldn't have called it awkward, but it was a little unbearable. There was definitely a painful aura flowing between us.

"It looks like Akiharu-kun's recovered to some degree, based on how he was acting just now."

"Is that how he looked?" she asked.

"I thought so."

"Well, maybe, if you say so."

Again, she seemed to be getting at something, just like when she had said, "Akiharu's got a stronger personality than you think."

So what was she saying? She changed the subject before I could figure it out.

"So apparently you were the last one to hear Tomoe's voice."

"Yeah. Although it was over the phone. Did you hear that from Mikoko-chan? Or from the detectives?"

"Mikoko," she said, nodding. "I went to her place yesterday after the funeral ended, but . . . I think she needs more time to recover."

"Ah."

"And that doesn't bother you at all?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean you just heard that Mikoko is feeling down, and I'm asking if that bothers you."

"Everybody sure is hung up on that," I said. Muimi-chan looked a bit puzzled, possibly because of the word *everybody*.

She let out a big sigh and stretched. "Fucking clueless . . ."

"What's that? I couldn't quite make that out."

"Ah, nothing. Listen, you might not want to hear this, and frankly I'm the last person who should be telling you. I was the one who was opposed to it in the first place. . . ."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Okay, let me ask you a favor, then. It's a simple favor and there's no catch. Just go visit Mikoko's place, will ya?"

She pulled a piece of paper out of her jersey pocket and handed it to me. "Aoii Mikoko" was written on it in hiragana, and below that were her address and phone number.

"Man, these are some round letters. Who wrote this?"

"Me."

"Ah . . ."

"What's that supposed to mean? What up with that expression, like you saw that answer coming or something?"

"Uh, nothing. That's not what I was going to say." I looked down at the memo in an effort to escape her deadly gaze, and

confirmed Mikoko-chan's address. Horikawa Oike. Come to think of it, had I heard that before? It felt like I had, but it also felt like I was learning her address for the first time. I couldn't remember.

"It's pretty far from school. I guess that means she commutes here on her Vespa."

"Nope, bus. This school doesn't allow bikes."

"It doesn't?"

Incidentally, I commuted on foot. I had a bike, but I didn't use it much, as a general rule. It wasn't that I particularly liked walking, but somehow it works for me anyway.

"Okay, so I go to Mikoko-chan's place, and then what?"

"She's down, so cheer her up. Just say stuff like 'it won't do any good to just sit around feeling blue' and 'keep your chin up.' I'm sure that'll do."

"Oh, just the usual crap, huh? But wouldn't that kind of thing be better coming out of you? Oh, but I guess you already told her yesterday. But if her good friend couldn't even cheer her up, I'm a lost cause."

"It's not that hard. Just go there and that'll be enough. Seriously, that's all. Go see her, say a word or two of encouragement, and then just play it by ear."

Whatever that meant.

But then again, I didn't really have any reason to refuse, and it was a relatively convenient proposal, so I went ahead and accepted. "Okay."

"Try stopping by today after school."

Just then, the bell indicating the start of third period rang. "Oh, crap," said the look on Muimi-chan's face. My face probably didn't show it, but I pretty much felt the same way.

Inokawa-sensei, the Cerberus of time.

"Ah, crap, that was the bell."

"Even if we go now, we'll be marked as absent. Or rather, he won't even let us into the classroom," I said.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now. Hate to miss out on Akiharu's studly performance, but let's cut class."

She was quick to make a decision. I hesitated to make a decision for just a moment longer. But no amount of mental effort would turn back the hands of the clock, so I just gave up. "Fine."

"So, what now? Wanna go eat?"

"The dining hall's probably still crowded at this time, right?

"Oh, right. Well, wanna stay here and chat a little more?"

"Well, then can I ask you something?" I said, thinking this would make a good opportunity. "Was there anyone who might've had something against Tomo-chan?"

Muimi-chan's face immediately grew serious. It was like she was deliberating over something. Or, more likely, she was just mentally confirming something she'd already thought of.

"Nope, no one," she said decisively, after a long pause and a perplexed expression. "Logically speaking, nobody *could* have had something against her."

" 'Nobody could have had something against her' . . . heh, kind of a weird phrase. Sounds like a crappy translation or something."

"But I think it's an accurate one. I mean, I think. I've known her only since high school, though."

"Speaking of which, how do you all know each other, anyway? You said you've been friends with Mikoko-chan since you were little kids, right?"

"Mikoko and I were childhood friends, and then I met Akiharu and Tomoe in high school."

"Hey, wait. Isn't that a little strange?"

"What?"

"Mikoko-chan is nineteen, and her birthday is in April. Tomo-chan just turned twenty. . . ."

"Oh, no. Tomoe repeated a grade in junior high."

"Ah." So she hadn't entered college late or returned from abroad after all. She had just been held back a year. I hadn't even considered that option.

"The thing is, she was in the hospital for a long time. She had to take about half a year off, and even after that she tended to be absent a lot. She just didn't have the attendance record in order to pass. Apparently she was pretty sick. They said she was near death."

Near death.

Death.

Awareness of death.

"Hahhh . . ." I tried my best to be coolheaded about it, but I wasn't sure how well I managed to pull it off. "I see, so that's what it was."

So that was Emoto Tomoe's story. I nodded a few times so that Muimi-chan wouldn't notice my surprise.

"So anyway, it's been the four of us ever since high school. Apparently that was when Akiharu and Tomoe first met too."

"I see. Go on."

"Oh, right. So in other words, Tomoe was really good at adapting. Or wait . . . maybe that's not it. Maybe she was a little bit like you, if you don't mind my saying," she said, pointing at me twice. "You've heard of the 'personal space bubble,' right? Well, she was extremely good at defining

them. She could get close to people as far as a certain point, but she would never step over that line. She would never come into intimate contact with anybody, and on top of that she never let anybody come into intimate contact with her. She always stayed at a cautious distance, never too near or too far. Kind of like a master sword fighter."

". . ."

The term *sword fighter* made Miiko-san spring to mind for a second.

"Tomoe was my friend, but . . . I don't think she ever opened up to me. I also don't think I was ever any help to her."

"I doubt that," I said, but my words probably didn't mean anything to her. They didn't mean much to me either. Whether her hunch about Tomo-chan was right or not, it probably wasn't very far from the truth.

But Muimi-chan, you mustn't mix things up. It's incredibly rude to Tomo-chan. If you're really her friend, you shouldn't be saying such things.

Tomo-chan and I weren't alike. We were simply on similar tracks. In essence, however, we were different.

The only ones who are really similar to me are the murderers, Muimi-chan.

"Anyway, she was that kind of chick so by nature she couldn't have done anything to incite a grudge. I think you can say that for certain."

"Then who the hell killed her?"

"Like I know. Probably that serial killer."

"The serial killer uses knives, I think."

"Well, whatever. Somebody killed her. Those cops looked pretty sharp, so I'm sure they'll find who did it if we just let it be. There's nothing we can do right now anyway."

She wore a stern face that didn't match her passive comment. Surely she was speaking these words against her own will. Her beloved friend had been murdered, and there was nothing she could do. She must have felt helpless.

But it really was beyond her control. It was probably true that she had no idea who the killer could have been. She had nobody at whom to direct her anger.

Hmm.

"What the hell is everyone doing?" she said, looking at all the students walking by outside the lounge. "Seriously, what the hell are they doing?"

"Everyone?"

"Everyone. Everyone here. It's so stupid. They're just living. They're just not dead, that's all. They're just fucking living."

They're just fucking living.

She repeated the phrase one more time. "Ah, I'm groggy," she said, straightening up again. "I wonder if any of these people really have a purpose. A purpose for living, or a future goal or something. I wonder if they actually have those things."

"They must. I mean, I'm sure it varies from person to person. But it doesn't really matter either way."

"That's not really what I'm trying to say. I don't know. It's not that complicated. Like, take those chicks over there," she said, pointing to a group of girls on the opposite side of the lounge. They had a sophisticated air about them, suggesting they were probably sophomores or juniors. I couldn't make

out what they were saying, but even if I could hear them, they were most likely chattering about something I wouldn't have understood anyway. They were laughing and slapping one another on the back with giddy enjoyment.

"Now let's say I had an assault carbine in my hands. An M4A1. Then I aim at them, and . . . ratatatatata! What would happen?"

I looked over at them once again. Their laughter was just as giddy as before, but in my head, I saw them drenched in blood, their bodies torn apart, pieces blown all the way out the window.

"Well, I suppose they'd probably die."

"Yeah, they'd probably die. But in that moment, what would they be thinking? Would they have regrets? . . . I don't think they would."

She glared at them with contempt, but none of them noticed. They were fully absorbed in their own chatter, so much that they didn't even glance in our direction.

"They probably wouldn't have a shred of remorse. Nothing left undone. After all, they're just living their lives without any goals or aspirations. What could they possibly leave behind?"

". . . ."

"Of course, I'm not saying life is dull. It's got its moments. But all these people are desperate. They're all desperately looking for a way to kill tomorrow's time. Suddenly they're all just thinking about ways to kill time. 'How will I spend tomorrow? And the next day? How can I kill twenty-four hours?' Like idiots, they desperately scramble for ways to fill their schedules. But what *is* that? What's the point in that? Tomorrow might as well not come at all, if they're just living

to kill time. If you're *just* living, you might as well die. . . . That's what I think, anyway. . . . Ah, sorry, I guess that was all kind of weird."

"No, it was really interesting."

And I really meant it.

Muimi-chan was probably thinking this, as well: In the end, what about Tomo-chan? What was she thinking in that moment when she was killed? For Muimi-chan, who had never been able to step over that line into Tomo-chan's heart, this would remain an eternal mystery. But if I were simply to speculate, if I were to speak from what I had seen as a passive observer, I would bet that she was no different from the giddy girls we were observing: Tomo-chan died with no regrets.

"The dining hall's probably cleared out a bit by now." Muimi-chan checked the time on her watch and stood to her feet. "Let's get some food. If we go to Ryôyû Hall we can probably get a seat."

"Hey, I'm sorry, but would you mind just going alone? I'm not really hungry."

"Oh," she said, tilting her head at me a bit. She started to take off, but then came to a halt and looked back at me.

"By the way, how do you know Mikoko's birthday is in April and that she's nineteen?"

"I heard it from her."

"Let me rephrase that: Why did you *remember* something like that? Your memory is totally crap. There's no way you would remember details like that, normally."

It was a rude question, but she was probably justified in doubting me, considering I had completely forgotten Akiharu-kun's face.

"Eh, well, I have my reasons. I won't get into it."

"Hmm?" she said with a puzzled look, but didn't pry any further.

"Let me ask one last question too," I said. "Muimi-chan, do you know what *x* over *y* is?"

"Hm? Probably means *x* divided by *y*, right?"

"Yeah, right."

"I don't know of any other explanation."

"Okay, don't worry about it. Thanks."

"What's this about?"

"It was Tomo-chan's dying message. I don't know what it means."

She looked a bit puzzled by the phrase *dying message*, but again, she didn't pry.

"Mmm . . . Well, see ya later," she said after a moment's thought. "Don't forget about Mikoko." She waved a hand at me and left the lounge.

I waved good-bye to her. From there, I stayed in the lounge for a while, not thinking anything in particular, just sitting in a daze. Soon enough my throat started to hurt from all the cigarette smoke, so I made my way outside. I put my hand into my pocket, where it touched a piece of paper. I pulled it out to see that it was the memo Muimi-chan had just given me with Mikoko-chan's address written down.

"Guess I don't have a choice. . . ."

Maybe I should have viewed this as another good opportunity. Fortunately, the class after general education was a lecture in which the professor never took attendance. I considered my options for approximately three seconds before settling on a self-declared holiday.

At the same time, I thought about the fact that when I died, not only would I not have regrets—I would be relieved.

And, walking by all those people who were just living utterly without purpose, I left the lounge behind.

2

Mikoko-chan's apartment in Horikawa Oike was even more lavish and splendid than Tomo-chan's. It was far too ritzy for a mere college student; it had an almost sublime air about it.

"Now then . . ."

The bus deposited me in front of her apartment building at just around two o'clock. The time right now, however, was 3:30. So, looking at the facts objectively and rationally, this meant I'd spent an awkward hour and half just standing at the building's entrance.

"What was he doing all that time? Why, he was shaking in his boots at the very idea of visiting a girl of his age in her apartment where she lived alone." I said aloud.

I tried to reaffirm the current state of affairs and apply a personal interpretation, but there was hardly a point. It made me feel kind of stupid. But if I thought about it, this was possibly the first time I had ever made a decision to take an action, and then still hesitated to the point that I wasn't moving at all. If it had been a close friend, I wouldn't have gone to such lengths to consider each and every little possibility and detail, but I had only known Mikoko-chan for a few days (or actually since last month). That didn't bother me, personally, but I didn't want to accidentally put Mikoko-chan in a bad mood.

That is to say, as an innately passive human being, I suck at taking the initiative.

"Man, this is so lame. . . ."

Still, an hour and a half was a bit much, even for me. The longer I stood there, the stupider I felt, but I at last made up my mind and stepped inside the building.

Unlike Tomo-chan's building, there was no autolock here and thus no need for a card key, but there was a security camera watching over the lobby. Much more effective than an autolock, which is pretty easy to get past. Of course, the most effective method was what they had in Kunagisa's monster of an apartment: a real live security guard.

I looked at the memo I had received from Muimi-chan.

Fourth floor, room three.

I boarded the elevator and pressed four. I arrived at the fourth floor a moment later and began my way down the narrow hallway. Then I spotted surveillance cameras in front of the elevator and on both sides of the hallway. Wasn't security a bit too tight here? Even convenience stores didn't have this many cameras. Maybe a big celebrity was living here in secret. Even though it was Kyoto. Or wait, maybe it was *because* it was Kyoto.

My head full of these meaningless ponderings, I arrived at the door of room three. Deciding that since I'd made it this far, there was no point in hesitating anymore, I went ahead and pushed the button for the intercom.

Inside, I heard a relatively normal-sounding bell ring, and then the sound of someone moving around. Figuring that, as a girl, she would probably take some time getting ready before coming to the door, I prepared myself for the long haul and leaned up against the wall behind me.

"Okay, I'm opening up now!"

Wha?

Wow. That was freaking fast. I guess I should've been glad, but something about it gave me a bad feeling. And as a passive observer, my unpleasant premonitions boasted a 100 percent accuracy rate. Crap. Something big was coming.

"This is pretty late for you, Muimi-chan. . . . Did something happen?"

K-chunk.

The lock slid open with a satisfying sound and the door opened.

I failed to respond, and Mikoko-chan *couldn't* respond.

It was a dead freeze, and ctrl + alt + del wouldn't fix it.

"Ah . . . ah . . . ah . . ." She turned bright red, then pale blue. Then back to bright red.

"Ciao," I greeted, for lack of a better idea.

"*Eeeeeyaaaaahhhh!!!!*" She let out an ear-piercing scream as the door slammed shut with such an incredible noise and force that I thought the entire frame might break. The whole world distorted for a moment, and then came a silence, as if the whole thing had never happened.

Well, if worse came to worst, at least the security cameras could vouch for my innocence in regards to her scream.

"Well . . . then again . . ."

She was still wearing her morning face. Her hair was all messy, and her bunny-print pajamas were partially unbuttoned. So Mikoko-chan's reaction to suddenly being confronted by a member of the opposite sex wasn't all that weird after all.

"Why?!" came a voice from the other side of the door. She sounded like she was just barely holding back tears. Or maybe she wasn't holding them back at all. "Why-why-why-why? What are you doing there? Wasn't Muimi-chan supposed to

be coming over? It's like, gumshoe Asagi Semimaru solves the case of the sealed room decapitation murders right away, but the culprit was caught red-handed! Oh, my head! I don't get this! Why?! Nowaynowaynoway! You're a ghost! This is a lie! A dream! A nightmare!"

Aw, crap, she was panicking.

I wasn't doing such a great job keeping my cool either, but with her getting this flustered, I might just be able to keep my wits about me. Interesting. So Muimi-chan was originally planning to come visit her. Then that lazy punk passed the role over to me, and she hadn't even told Mikoko-chan about it.

Okay, conditions confirmed. Proceed with maneuver authorization.

"This is creepy! You shouldn't even know where I live! You're an illusion! This is all some vicious prank!"

"Well, I'll explain everything later, so just let me in. No point in standing her talking like this."

"Go away! Hurry up and go! No wait, I'm sorry, don't go! I'll go clean up and get ready, so wait a minute! Please! And forget what you just saw!"

"I've already seen you once, so what's the big deal? Just let me in."

"*No!*"

With that final, sharp rejection, I heard her stomp back into the depths of her room. This was followed by what sounded like full-on battle. She was probably cleaning up. She really didn't have to go to the trouble, I thought as I leaned back against the wall again. I waited half an hour before she finally let me in. It was past four o'clock.

The structure of the apartment itself wasn't so different from Tomo-chan's, but there was a ridiculous amount of furniture and other furnishings. It seemed Mikoko-chan was a woman who liked her material possessions. It wasn't a messy place, but you couldn't deny there was a little clutter.

"Wait a sec, okay? I'll pour some tea."

She wore a pink camisole and shorts. The outfit exposed far more skin than her pajamas from before, but I wasn't about to say anything. Her hair was also very nicely styled. It was like she had become a completely different person.

She placed a cup on the low table. Of course it wasn't filled with tap water, but with delicious-looking barley tea. It had three ice cubes in it and looked nice and cold.

She plopped down across from me. "Um-um-um . . . So what's going on, Ikkun?"

Perhaps still shaken up, she was acting a bit strange. If she had been walking around Shinkyôgoku, the mobile police would have stopped her for sure.

"Um, so yeah, Muimi-chan should be here any minute! It's already past the time we were supposed to meet, oh my God, where *is* that silly girl?"

"Uh, I'm her substitute," I said, waving for her to calm down.

"Wha!" she cried in surprise, and then flashed an ambiguous smile that seemed to express anger, embarrassment, joy, and some other stuff I couldn't put my finger on all at the same time.

"Freaking Muimi-chan . . ."

"Hey, it's okay. I'm not planning to be here long, so just relax. I heard you were feeling pretty lousy, but I'm glad to see you seem pretty alive."

"Oh . . ."

"The word *lousy* seemed to spur a reaction out of her, and she hung her head down. Perhaps I hadn't been careful enough with my wording, I thought, but that was the only way I knew how to phrase it.

Yes. Not only had Mikoko-chan's friend been killed; Mikoko-chan was also the first one to see her friend's corpse. She was the first person to have the image of that still, lifeless body burned onto her retinas. And that burned image probably still remained, even now. It wasn't something she could just bounce back from.

"So you came here because I haven't been going to school and you were worried about me?"

"Yeah. Well, something like that."

The reality of it was a little different, but I supposed the difference was negligible.

This time she flashed a straightforward, happy smile. "Thank you!" she spouted. "I'm so happy you came!"

"There's nothing to thank me for. I didn't even bring anything."

I realized this as I said it. Showing up to another person's house without bringing anything was probably pretty thoughtless of me. Not to mention the fact that she wasn't feeling well. But since I had come directly from school, I didn't reckon there was anything I could've done.

"Oh, no problem," Mikoko-chan said. "It's not like I'm incapacitated or something. It's just that . . . if I go to school, I know I'll start thinking about Tomo-chan."

"But it's not like you don't think about her when you stay home, right?"

"Well, that's true, but . . ." She laughed weakly. "But seeing you has cheered me up. I'm okay. I'll be going to school again starting tomorrow."

"I don't really think the school thing matters one way or the other. Have the police been visiting you?"

"Yeah, a few times. A big guy and kind of a scary lady. But I *was* the one who found her body, after all, and this *is* a murder case."

"Who could've killed her?" I said, not so much asking as talking to myself, but still loud enough so that Mikoko-chan could hear.

"I don't know." Her weak response was no surprise. "Tomo-chan wasn't the type of girl to make enemies. That's for sure."

"Yeah, that's what Muimi-chan said, too. But I wonder . . . realistically speaking, is it actually possible to live without ever being resented or disliked by anybody? I have my doubts about that."

"Huh?"

"I think it's worth considering the possibility that you only feel that way about Tomo-chan because you two were such good friends, at that in reality, someone out there did resent her. Even if that resentment was unmerited."

She grew unbearably silent. She wore such an expression of pain that I blurted out an apology. "Sorry." She may have been acting strong, but she was still in no state to be discussing things like this yet.

"I shouldn't have come here after all, huh?"

"Huh? Why?"

I really hadn't meant for her to hear me. But her face swung back up at me. She'd heard. "Ikkun, that isn't true. I'm glad you came."

"Come on . . . you're just trying to look cheerful because I'm here, right?"

A close friend, one who could speak frankly to her, like Muimi-chan, would have been much better in this situation.

"But that isn't true," she persisted. "Even if I am just acting, the more I do it, the truer it'll become, right? I'm fine. I'm really glad you came. Even if you were just doing what Muimi-chan said and you really hate being here."

"I don't hate being here. . . . If I hate something, I say so."

"Really?"

"Nah, I just thought I'd try saying it. I'm actually pretty easy to push around."

"I don't doubt that," she agreed.

I let out something like a sigh and stretched my arms. "All joking aside, how are you really feeling? Are you finally starting to get over the shock?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's just . . ." Her eyes shifted to my right. I followed her gaze to see that there were scattered piles of newspapers and magazines lying around. "Umm, do you mind if I talk about when I was in elementary school and stuff?"

"Go for it. I'll listen."

"It was when I was in the third grade. The building my class was in was undergoing construction, so trucks and bulldozers were constantly coming and going. But then one day, there was sort of a near miss, and a truck carrying a big load of sand crashed into the first-grade building."

"Gee, I wouldn't call something that big a 'near miss.' "

"Well, maybe not. The wall was smashed in, and sand spilled into the classroom, burying some of the first graders. It was a mess. But you know, we were still kids, so to us it was almost like a fun event. Muimi-chan was going wild, surfing on the sand mound and stuff."

"Heh." She really did seem like she would've been that kind of kid.

"So, then, the next day. I woke up early and went to read the newspaper. Anybody would be proud to have their school mentioned in the newspaper, right? I mean, it was just because the accident had happened there, so it wasn't really anything to be proud of, but just the idea that my school was 'in the papers' was enough to make me happy."

"Well, you were just a kid."

"But you know what? It wasn't in the paper," she said with an uncharacteristically glum sigh. "To me, it was such a big incident, but on a national level, it wasn't a big deal at all. I don't remember what the headline article was that day, but in that moment, it felt like someone was telling me, 'Your existence isn't worth squat.' Something so amazing to me didn't mean a damn thing to everyone else. It was the saddest feeling."

". . ."

"I feel kind of the same way now," she said, pointing to the stacks of newspapers and magazines. I could see where she was coming from. Sensational murder stories like this Kyoto prowler were one thing, but the papers weren't likely to dwell for very long on something as ordinary (sorry to say) as the murder of a single college student in her apartment. It would be in the news the next day, and then maybe the next at best.

But even then, it would be a brief article that didn't take up too many column inches.

I grew silent. Mikoko-chan did likewise. We remained in complete silence like this for a while, but she was the first one to break it, with a question that took things in a confusing new direction.

"Ikkun, have you gone antiquing or anything with Asano-san since the other day?"

"Huh?" I blinked at her. "What? What do you mean?"

"I . . . oh, I'm sorry! I don't know where that came from! I didn't mean to ask that!"

"It's okay. . . ."

Now how did she know that I went antiquing with Miiko-san sometimes? There was no way Miiko-san would've told her something that personal. Come to think of it, I seemed to remember that I might have promised to go with her again . . . oh, yeah, that's right. Was Mikoko-chan awake that time?

"Does it bother you, by any chance?" I asked.

"What what what? Does what bother me?"

I had asked because I thought she might be feeling bad that I had to promise to go antiquing with Miiko-san just to thank her for putting Mikoko-chan up for the night, but this nervous reaction was not what I was expecting. There was just no reading this girl.

"Anyway, don't let it bother you. We do that a lot."

"You do?"

"Yeah. She likes antiquing quite a bit. Did she show you inside her closet? As small as that room is, she won't stop buying antiques. I guess she sells them after she's enjoyed them for a while, though. She says art isn't something one person should monopolize." At the same time, however, she

was no saint herself. "Basically I'm there to carry her stuff. Even a guy like me has *some* basic strength, and they say you should always lend what you have to others. I'm not particularly interested in antiques, but that doesn't mean I hate them or anything, so if she asks me, I go."

"Huh. I see. So you and Asano-san go out . . . a lot . . . and stuff." For some reason her voice was trailing off.

"Not a lot, really. But you see, she's been in Kyoto for a long time. She said she's been living here alone ever since she dropped out of high school. I got her to show me around to all the Buddhist temples and shrines once while we were antiquing, like Seimei Shrine and the Philosopher's Walk. Do you know 'em?"

"Yeah. Well, I know the names, anyway. I'm not really interested in that stuff."

"Huh? Didn't you say you knew Kyoto pretty well?"

How could she know Kyoto well if she wasn't even interested in the temples and shrines?

"Oh, uh, well, you know, yadda yadda yadda," she said, blatantly dodging the question. "How come you only remember that kind of stuff? . . . Er, I mean, you and Asano-san must be pretty close then, huh?"

This conversation was starting to sound familiar. She was awfully hung up on the whole Miiko-san subject. Had something happened between them? I couldn't imagine what might have taken place in just a single night. Why was she trying so hard to bring me and Miiko-san together? It didn't make much sense to me.

"Yeah, well, she's a pretty interesting person and all," I said. "But we're not 'close,' per se; she kind of takes care of

me. Like sometimes she lends me her car. It's a Fiat 500. You know, *the* Fiat 500."

"Huh . . . well, maybe it's all okay then."

Apparently having no interest in cars whatsoever (she drove a 'scoot,' after all), she let my words pass right through her and started babbling about something I didn't understand.

"I wonder if she minds you coming to another girl's house like this."

"Huh? Oh. Uhh, are you telling me to leave?"

"No, that's not what I mean! I mean, you go out with her and stuff, right? So, I mean . . . dammit, Ikkun, you pinhead!" she shrieked, slamming her hands on the table, her face bright red. Why she was getting so emotional over this, I had absolutely no idea. All I could do was be confused. It all seemed awfully unreasonable to me, but it was obvious that my presence was only making her angry.

"I don't really get it, but I'm sorry," I said.

"Ahhh," she moaned. "Fine, let me put it another way. You and Asano-san go shopping and stuff together, right?"

"Well, yeah. Not to run the point into the ground or anything."

"So would you go shopping and stuff with me too, then?"

Her logic here was beyond my comprehension, but her face was written with such a sincere look of what could only be described as "last-ditch desperation" that I just couldn't bear to point that out.

"Yeah, I guess I would. No reason not to."

"Really? For sure? You're not just saying that because you're on the spot?"

Her whole body leaned forward like her life depended on the answer to this question. She chewed on her lip. She

looked for all the world like a little kid who was about to start bawling. Her emotions were exposed so plainly that there was no way you would guess she was a university student about to turn nineteen.

"You sure are hung up on this. Did something happen, by any chance?"

"Answer the question!"

"I mean . . . probably. I can promise, if you'd like."

"Really? You really mean it?"

"I don't lie. As a general rule."

"You absolutely mean it?"

"If there's something you want to buy, sure."

"This is a promise! If you forget, I'll be pissed!"

"Okay."

Overwhelmed by Mikoko-chan, I had gone and let her pull a promise out of me. But it wasn't such a terrible thing, so I decided to let it slide. This, at last, seemed to calm her down, and she proceeded to drink down the tea in her cup in a single gulp.

"Ahh," she sighed. "I'm so sorry. Occasionally I get a little emotional and I don't even know what I'm saying."

"Occasionally? Did you just say occasionally?"

"Er, well, all the time," she nodded, sheepishly.

Huh.

The shock of Tomo-chan's death. Certainly Mikoko-chan wasn't completely over it, but at least she wasn't so down that she was thinking about following after her by committing suicide or anything. Somehow she was keeping herself together. Some of the stuff she was saying didn't make a lot of sense, but that was forgivable. It seemed she was okay for the

time being. She would probably be mostly recovered by Saturday.

"Well, that's it for me today," I said, starting to get up. "I'm afraid I've got to go."

"What-what-what? You're going already? Oh, I'm sorry, I did put you in a bad mood, didn't I?"

"I said I didn't plan on staying long when I got here, right? Well, let's get together again soon."

"Ah, um!" she said, stopping me as I tried to leave. "Um . . . um, Ikkun."

"What?"

"Um . . ." She hesitated a bit, a *lot*, rather, and thought for a while before she spoke. "What do you think Tomo-chan wanted to say that last time you talked to her?" she said.

The final phone call.

Tomo-chan had tried to tell me something.

"I have no idea, really. That day was the first time I ever even talked to her, so how could I possibly know something like that? I don't even know why she was talking to me. But, Mikoko-chan, you must have some idea, right?"

"I . . ." she dropped her head down. "I don't know. I don't even have a clue."

". . ."

"Because Tomo-chan never talked to anyone."

She never talked.

She never opened up to anybody. She kept her cautious distance.

"It was like our friendship took place through an unbreakable sheet of glass. She never told me anything deep about herself, about what she felt in her heart."

". . ."

Then why had such a person made an attempt to talk to me? "Nonsense," I muttered aloud.

"Huh? What?"

"I doubt I'll get much of an answer out of you with the current state you're in, so I won't ask a lot, but Mikoko-chan, will you answer just this one question for me?"

"Wh . . ." She wore a puzzled expression. "What?"

"What do you think *x* over *y* means?"

She thought it over for a moment. "I don't know," she answered.

Oh, I see. How about that.

I nodded and said, "Well, see you at school. Sorry I bothered you." With that, I left her apartment. I proceeded out of the building and began contemplating what to do next.

Horikawa Oike.

There was quite a distance between here and my apartment, but even still, I could probably make it home in around thirty minutes on foot. It seemed like a waste of money to bother getting on a bus, so I decided to just walk.

It never crossed my mind that the world's greatest entrepreneur might be waiting in my room.

3

Near my apartment, by Senbon-demizu, I ran into Miiko-san, who was out for a stroll, aloof from the world. When she noticed me, she sped up to a pace unusually fast for her and came over to greet me.

"Yo."

"Hello. On your way to work?"

"Nope. Today I'm going to Mount Hiei."

"Ahh, with Suzunashi-san?"

She nodded. Suzunashi-san, full name Suzunashi Neon, was Miiko-san's close friend. She worked part-time at Enryaku Temple on Mt. Hiei in Shiga Prefecture. Some called her "Violence Neon." Others, "Blackout Suzunashi." She was sort of a cool lady, but prone to flipping out randomly. I occasionally saw her myself, but she would lecture me about something every time. For someone so young, she was strangely fond of lecturing others. It was hardly her only major personality issue, but I liked her more or less as much as I liked Miiko-san.

"It sounds like she wants some advice on something, so I'm going out there. I'll be back by tomorrow, so watch over things back here in the meantime. If someone comes to see me, just get their name and tell them whatever you want. If it's someone freaky-looking, don't worry about it."

"Uhh, sure, no problem, I guess."

"Also, you have a visitor."

"A visitor? For me?"

". . ."

"Yup," she nodded.

"When I noticed her, she was breaking into your place. She had a little pizzazz about her. Or rather, a *ton* of pizzazz. I don't know who it was, but her gender appeared to be female. She didn't seem to be up to anything in particular, so I just let it be."

A female? What woman was likely to come visit my place? I didn't have many friends to begin with, so it seemed like I should've been able to narrow it down pretty easily. But the way things had been going lately . . .

"Was she about this tall? If so, it was that detective."

"No. That was no detective. Detectives don't look like that," she affirmed with confidence. "Besides, I've met that detective you're talking about. I never forget a vibe I get from someone. Oh yeah, and there was a car parked by the apartment that looked like it was probably hers. Maybe it'll give you a clue. Well, see ya," she said, and made her way towards the parking lot. Today's *jinbei* had the word *Tranquility* printed on the back. Yep, she was in a good mood today, possibly because she was going to see Suzunashi-san.

But what did Suzunashi-san want with her anyway? She was the type of person who rarely called on others, so I couldn't get it out of my head. And just what kind of "advice" was she seeking? She may have liked sticking her nose in other people's problems, but when it came to sharing her own problems with others, Suzunashi-san was wholly passive.

"Something's odd here."

But the more pressing issue for me right now was: Who was this "visitor" currently waiting inside my apartment? If it wasn't Sasaki-san, who was it? There was always Muimi-chan and Mikoko-chan, but it was unlikely to be either of them. And Kunagisa was an all-out shut-in, so it was highly improbable that it could've been her.

I turned onto Nakadachiuri.

"Gah . . ."

Suddenly, everything was clear. Parked on the shoulder of the road, as if to say that it was above all traffic laws, was a spectacular bright red Cobra. Completely out of place in a city like Kyoto, it was a monstrous, incredible specimen of machinery.

"Oh my God . . . I don't want to go home."

I seriously considered the idea of running straight to Kunagisa's place, but based on personal experience, I could imagine the cruel fate that would be in store for me if it were ever revealed that I'd attempted escape. Giving up, I went back to the apartment, dragging my feet all the way.

I climbed up the stairs and headed for my room. The fact that my locked door was no longer locked didn't surprise me. This was a woman who could mimic voices, pick locks, and read minds: The most difficult task was for her as easy as breathing. I opened the door to see the private contractor, adorned in a wine-red suit as dark as blood, sitting on the windowsill with legs crossed, as if her presence were the most natural thing in the world.

Uncompromising.

Aloof.

"Hey, Aikawa-san."

"Didn't I tell you not to call me by my last name?"

"Hey, Jun."

She gave me a slightly cynical grin.

Aikawa Jun.

Mankind's greatest private contractor. I had met her a month ago through the great fiasco that had occurred on that island. She left me that day with the cool line, "If our fates are linked, we shall meet again," only to show up to hang out at my university the next day. She was kind of weird like that. And what's more, she spent the following week making me do her bidding, not even allowing time for sleep, until finally having to leave Kyoto for a job. Speaking from that experience, she was a woman with whom I didn't particularly want to get involved. She was perhaps the most unnerving person I had ever met.

Looking at her with all the objectivity I could summon, she was extremely wild—and she was a beauty of such wicked allure it was hard to resist her. She had any number of eccentric mannerisms. And she was completely unapproachable.

She looked at me, searching my expression. "You don't seem at all surprised to see me."

"Oh, no, I am. So you're back in Kyoto, huh?"

"Yeah, well, y'know, duty calls. We can talk about that later, though. . . . Ahh, I get it. You saw the flashing car outside and it tipped you off, huh?"

"No, actually the girl next door told me."

"Aw, and I was being extra careful not to be noticed. That makes me extremely . . ." Aikawa-san's expression grew sharp as a knife for a moment, but it was *only* for a moment before she reverted back to her normal sardonic smirk. "Eh, whatever," she said.

I removed my shoes and stepped into the room, then made my way straight to the sink. I poured a cup of tap water and served it to her. "Enjoy," I said.

"*Muchas gracias*," she replied, and drank about half of it before placing it on the windowsill.

Geez, she took it as if there was nothing unusual about it. Just once I wanted to see Aikawa-san get surprised about something.

"So what's going on? Why are you back in Kyoto?"

"I said I'll tell you later. More important, allow me to apologize for the period of neglect. But hey, you've got a nice place here. It's the perfect environment."

"Exactly where do you see that?"

"That's not what I mean. Come on, you know what I mean, don't you? Well, whatever. So what've you been up to lately, anyway?"

"Nothing, really. I'm just your average university student. I'm not living some *yakuza* lifestyle like you."

"Just a regular old student, huh?" she said, chuckling.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Oh, except for the fact that you apparently define 'average' as someone who starts nosing around when one of his classmates is murdered, and maintains friendly relations with serial killers."

". . ."

"Ooh, *there's* that surprised look. You've made me happy."

She jumped down from the windowsill and plopped herself down cross-legged on the tatami floor. Whether this was something she felt compelled to do because she was wearing such a short skirt, I wasn't sure, but either way, I kind of wished she hadn't.

"How do you know about that stuff?"

"How do you think I know?" She grinned with unbridled elation. But I had no idea what lurked behind this unbridled elation. I was expending copious amounts of energy just standing here talking to her like this. What's more, she was a mind reader of the highest order, so my emotions were all leaking out of the pipes. It felt like we were playing poker, but with my hand faceup on the table. She sure didn't make such things easy. She was like a piece of food that you couldn't eat no matter how long you boiled and grilled it.

But as long as she didn't want something out of you, she was a nice person, I guess. She was my type and all.

"I have no idea," I said. "Not even a clue. It's not like I can ever tell what you're thinking."

"Think. And then face it, man. I'm a lone wolf, but I've got a quite a number of friends, in Kyoto and out."

"Hey, that's really something. It's great to have a lot of friends. Even I can acknowledge that. I'll acknowledge it right now. So what friends would you be referring to in this case?"

"For example, Sasa Sasaki."

". . ."

"Ikaruga Kazuhito."

". . ."

"Kunagisa Tomo."

She pulled a single envelope from her black bag.

"Here you go, it's from your sweet, sweet Kunagisa."

"For me?"

"Yep. She said it's the 'thingy' she promised."

I accepted the envelope. Well, how about that. She must have paid a visit to Shirosaki before coming to my apartment. While I was just your everyday, boringly average university student, Kunagisa Tomo was, with all her eccentricities, an expert computer specialist. She and Aikawa-san knew each other fairly well.

As ordered by Aikawa-san, I thought for a moment. It looked like she had come back to Kyoto for a job. Then she had gone to Kunagisa for help with said job, just as I had gone to her for help investigating Tomoe's death. Then when Aikawa-san went to visit Kunagisa, Kunagisa had decided to use her as a messenger. Was that what happened? But . . . something was missing. There was no reason Kunagisa should have to ask Aikawa-san to do such a thing, and there was no reason Aikawa-san should agree to do it.

This brought a much uglier scenario to mind, and it wasn't purely theoretical. To be more specific, Aikawa-san was . . .

"Well, now there's just the simple matter of collecting your fee. Tell me what you know about your pal, the Kyoto prowler."

Aikawa wasn't a messenger—she was the collector.

"Jun-san, you mean you came to Kyoto . . ."

"Yup. To have a little chat about morals with that psychotic nutjob."

Aikawa-san made her living as a "private contractor." This involved anything and everything. Simply put, she was a jack-of-all-trades, a multitalented freelancer who didn't limit herself by specializing in any one particular field. Whether it was walking dogs, solving locked-room murder mysteries, or catching mass murderers who had already cut up ten people into little pieces, as long as there was money involved, she would take it on. Granted, there probably weren't too many nuts out there offering a big stack of cash just or walking their dog. At any rate, she lived out each day "accomplishing the impossible"—never bothering to make the distinction between legal and illegal.

Be that as it may.

"The Kyoto slasher claimed a twelfth victim yesterday. Seeing as you lived in another country for so long, maybe you don't realize this, but that number is unprecedented in Japan. This kind of incident simply doesn't happen in Japan, much less in a provincial city. What's more, the identity of the killer is a complete mystery. At this point, it's going to require government intervention."

"And so you've been called upon?"

She nodded. "It sounds like there are other people at work on the case as well—Public Welfare, Walker, Texas Ranger—frankly, I don't really know who. Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of horizontal ties. At any rate, my job right now is just to stop that maniac from claiming more victims."

"Did Sasaki-san hire you?"

"Can't tell you that. What do you call it again? The code of confidentiality? Business ethics? Trade secrets?" She gave a comical little shrug and laughed. "Anyway, it seems a lot more worthy of my time than that crazy fiasco on Wet Crow's Feather Island ever was. That's for sure."

Worthy of her time. That's all she had to say in regard to the grisly murderer who had already chopped up twelve people. The idea of taking on this anonymous monster didn't frighten her in the least. On the contrary, she was so laid-back about the whole affair you'd think she was sashaying on her way to a picnic.

Suddenly, I realized all over again just how dangerous this crimson woman was.

And I also realized that I was currently face-to-face with said danger.

"Now then. I heard from Kunagisa-chan that you know a thing or two about all this. I don't suppose you'd mind filling in your favorite big sister—I am like a sister to you, aren't I—on the details now, would you?" she said in a soft, coaxing voice, like one might use to address their pet cat, as her fingers crept up my face. It wasn't that I particularly minded that voice, but the speaker herself was either a tiger or a panther, and it was more than a mere tabby like me could resist.

Damn that Kunagisa. What ever happened to helping each other out? Without the slightest hesitation, she had sold me out.

"What's your problem? Why are you clamming up and looking away? You're being awfully uncooperative. Don't tell me you're not going to tell me. Are you breaking your contract? You promised this in exchange for what's in that envelope, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, but I said I'd tell *Kunagisa*, not just anybody. If I went and told you, it would be . . . what's the word? A betrayal? Immoral? Divisive? Rebellious? Whatever. The bottom line is that it feels like backstabbing, and that's just not my thing."

"Ex*cuse* me?!" she said, her voice suddenly much more stern. If looks could kill, I would already be dead. Which sounded a lot better than what was really in store for me.

"Are you saying you can tell Kunagisa but you can't tell me? Well goddamn. I had no idea you were such a cold son of a bitch. I see, I see. Gee, you make me sad. So you'll listen to Kunagisa, but you won't listen to me? I had no idea you were such a tough guy."

"It's not like that. It's just that with Kunagisa, no matter what you tell her, she's harmless. But you're planning on taking some kind of action, right? Getting myself directly involved with something like that, well . . . it's just not in my nature."

"Excuse me, did you just call me harmful?"

"Well . . . aren't you?"

As if she herself were aware of this, she refrained from objecting to my remark, instead murmuring to herself thoughtfully. She was, to a certain degree, someone who might listen

to reason. Once you had surpassed that degree, however, well, you can imagine what happened then—that is to say, it would backfire.

"Kunagisa will probably just tell me anyway. That girl has a big mouth. I figured I might as well just cut out the middleman and come straight to the source."

"Er, yeah, I know, but . . . I just have my own reasons, or rather, uh . . ."

"Hm? Ahhh, ah-ah-ah, I get it! Well, why didn't you say so?!" she said with a wickedly and ghastly grin. She beckoned to me. Each stroke of her hand was so alluring, so graceful, that it was mesmerizing.

"Uhh, you get what, exactly?"

"Just come to me. I'll tease you to your heart's delight."

Seeing that I still wouldn't budge, Aikawa-san instead crawled over to me on all fours. She stared up at me with a challenging, provocative gaze. She nestled her body into mine and wrapped her arms around my back, forcing all of her weight upon me. She applied some pressure, digging her nails into my back.

"Now. What were you saying?"

"Um, I'm terrified of you."

"By the by, did you know that my index finger is perilously close to jabbing through your ribs into your liver?"

". . ."

"Don't tense up so much. It's bad for you. It'll make your flesh all stringy. So just out of curiosity, who do you think is scarier—me, or the serial killer?" As she said this, she ran her tongue down the carotid artery on the right side of my neck. The pleasure I felt from this delicate sensation, along with the

more pressing sense of fear that she might actually take a gigantic bite out of my neck, bored their way into my brain.

Dammit.

Indeed, the serial killer did make for better company than this.

"Jun-san . . . I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to say no."

"Oh, go right on ahead. But if you do that I won't tease you like this anymore."

". . ."

"Either way is fine by me. It doesn't change the fact that you're going to talk. I've already decided that I'm going to have you tell me about this killer. That's a fact. But since you're a friend, I just thought I'd ask first. Now do you want me to be nice? Or do you want me to make this painful?"

"Uhh . . . what's the difference?"

The fact that we were in this embracing position was my one saving grace; I didn't have to see her face, and she couldn't see mine. But even still, my cold sweat and pounding heart probably betrayed my terror.

"What do you think is the difference?"

Chomp. She bit down on my neck. She literally had my life in her clutches. Softly, teasingly, she dug her canines into my skin, but at the same time worked a healthy amount of saliva onto her tongue, licking my flesh between her lips, rubbing her body against mine, running her fingers down my back.

"Okay!" I said, using every ounce of strength to pull myself away from her. "I won't disobey you anymore! Please forgive me!" Sitting a little apart from me, Aikawa-san responded with a sly yet somehow innocent smile.

"Don't get so serious. It was just a little joke," she said.

"Yeah, a *bad* joke. Bad for the heart, anyway . . ."

"Hahaha. Actually, I'm relieved. You're a healthy young man after all."

"Come on, give me a break."

I had to calm down. So I chugged down a cup of water. It didn't take long for my heartbeat to slow down, but the cold sweating was out of my control.

I am no good at dealing with this woman after all. I should have just run straight to Kunagisa's place without worrying what might happen later.

"Really now, this *is* nonsense."

After that, Aikawa-san managed to fish out of me every last detail about Zerozaki Hitoshiki, no stone left unturned. I tried my best to weasel out of revealing the key facts, but with her ability to read my mind, I wasn't especially successful. Every time I tried to hide something, she would see right through me and threaten me, and then either through coercion or trickery would pry the answer out of me. It served to remind me that I was basically her prisoner.

The person known as Zerozaki. His appearance, build, and clothes at the time we met. The way he spoke. The circumstances surrounding our first meeting. What we talked about. Even the details of our secret infiltration of Tomo-chan's apartment. Aikawa-san drew all of it out of me. At least, as much as I could remember.

It wasn't like Zerozaki and I were friends. We were just of the same breed, and we were like mirror reflections of one another. We hadn't exchanged any sort of promise, and he wasn't preventing me from talking.

Nevertheless, I felt so spineless it was a wonder I didn't collapse.

"Hmm . . ." After all that, Aikawa's smile disappeared and her expression grew more serious. She thought to herself in silence for a few minutes. "So this guy . . . Zerozaki, was it? Like *zero* and *zaki* put together?"

"Yeah. At least, that's what he calls himself."

"Zerozaki Hitoshi . . . ahhh, that's a nasty name."

Aikawa-san looked truly irritated, like the whole thing was just a big hassle. It was the first time I had ever seen her wear such an expression. It was almost refreshing.

"What do you mean? What's wrong with it?"

"No, no no no . . . On second thought, maybe a 'nasty name' isn't the right expression. But 'Zerozaki'? Sure is an *unusual* name."

"Oh, but you know, it might not be his real name. That guy's no fool. I doubt he would give someone his real name on a first encounter."

"That's beside the point. Even if it's an alias, the fact that he would choose an alias like 'Zerozaki' is proof that he's a nut. And if it is his real name, well . . ."

She began thinking in silence again. Once this lady started thinking about something, she sank into her own world, and if you were there beside her, it felt like you had become invisible. But then again, even an invisible man still exists. In this case it was more like you had become empty space.

"Even as a joke, there isn't an idiot on this *earth* who would announce himself with a 'killer's name' like that. 'Zerozaki,' huh? Damn, that's right above 'Susukino' in rank, isn't it? I guess it's still better than 'Niounomiya' and 'Yamiguchi,' but you know, I actually hope it *is* just an alias. Or better yet, just a case of two people having the same last name by coincidence. But there's no way that's it. There's no

way something that convenient would ever happen to me. Wow . . . so even Kunagisa, even an ex-member of the 'team' was of no use."

"Uh . . . is there something wrong with the name 'Zerozaki'?"

"Yeah, there is. It's about as terrible as names come. It's so bad that to us, the worst possible insult you could call someone was a 'Zerozaki.' That's how bad it is. I don't really want to bother explaining any deeper than that. To be perfectly honest, I don't want to have the slightest thing to do with the 'Zerozaki Ichizoku,' and that includes giving explanations. Eh, but actually it's the name itself that I don't like. In this case, the individual is essentially irrelevant. He's probably just some irregularity . . . probably. But is this guy really the Kyoto Prowler?"

"Yes, that's what he said."

"So you didn't actually witness him in the act? You're just taking his word for it?"

"Well, you could say that," I said, nodding.

"Hmm. So then there's a chance that he might be some delusional, lying bastard who's just saying this stuff."

"Yeah, there's definitely that chance. I mean, I didn't get that impression, though."

"Really? Come on, he's got a big tattoo on his face, right? And it covers the entire right side. Even in Chicago he'd be a freak. He's been standing out like that and he's still able to escape the cops without leaving a single clue behind?"

"Yeah, well . . ."

Naturally, I had considered this possibility myself as well. But having heard what he had to say, there was no basis on

which to call him a fake, and frankly, I didn't care all that much to begin with.

Whether it was him or not, it didn't make much of a difference to me. Maybe he wasn't the prowler.

"That guy is a murderer without a doubt," I said to Aikawa-san. "Aikawa-san, you must know that I haven't lived the most decent life, right? In Kobe, Houston, even here. Hell, even on that island I was almost killed. I may still not hold a candle to you, but I've seen my fair share of Hell in my time."

And Heaven was still a long way from here.

"I never actually saw him kill somebody, but he did almost kill me. He was just using a plain old short knife, and yet the terror I felt was that of someone facing an opponent with a *naginata* . . . no, with a machine gun."

"Hmm . . ." Apparently convinced, she nodded several times. "At any rate, I suppose the bottom line is that this expert of dissection who calls himself the 'prowler' is somewhere in Kyoto. Yeah. As long as I have that straight, that's enough."

"It is?"

"Sure it is. Combined with the other information I've gathered, it'll give me a place to start. For now, anyway. I think for the time being it'll be faster for me to proceed on my own two feet, if you know what I mean. If I don't have a bit of a challenge, things get boring and I can't function anymore. Know what I mean? Anyway, more importantly," she said, bringing the conversation back to me, "putting my stuff aside, what's going on with you? I heard from both Kunagisa and Sasaki that you've been sticking your nose in some boring, everyday kind of case."

"I got caught up in it."

"You got caught up and then you kept sticking your nose back in, didn't you? I mean, sneaking into the victim's apartment? Quit pretending you're just some passive observer."

Touché.

"Now what is it, exactly?" she pondered, looking at me with a touch of awe. "You're a hard guy to understand, y'know? It's like you have no conviction, or no style. What you say and what you do are completely different things."

"It's that clash that gives me my flavor."

"*What* flavor? Can't you view yourself objectively?"

"Sure I can . . ."

"You're more like the comic relief than a passive observer. Eh, but whatever. Do whatever you like. It's your life, I guess. Not my place to butt in. Not my problem."

"You're a cold woman."

"Not really. Keep studying, young'un. You do your own dirty work. And if you set out to do something, do it to the end. I told you before, didn't I? Quitting midway through is the worst thing a person can do. Oh yeah, and also," she said as if she had just remembered, even though that obviously wasn't the case, "a message from Kunagisa." She pointed to the envelope under my arm.

"What is it?"

"Don't go having an affair now, Ii-chan. I'll forgive a smooch on the cheek and nothing above that. 'I love youuu, kiss kiss,' " Aikawa-san said, mimicking Kunagisa's voice and intonation and grinning. "She said."

"Roger that," I said, throwing my hands up.

4

It had gotten to the time where it was technically okay to be eating dinner, so I invited Aikawa-san to join me. But because she was eager to proceed with her pursuit of Zerozaki as quickly as possible, she refused and soon left.

In the very end, I asked her one final question. "What do you think *x* over *y* means?"

"Don't look to others to confirm what you already know," she said flatly. Touché, I thought.

I let out a sigh as I watched her disappear.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Aikawa Jun.

She would probably find him in a matter of two days. I hadn't exactly provided a cornucopia of information, but it was more than enough to serve Aikawa-san's purpose. She was in a state of mind beyond my wildest imagination, and even that was something she was free to break away from whenever she desired. The superiority of Aikawa Jun's cognitive faculties defied the imagination.

And the two would likely collide. Mankind's Greatest and the Human Failure would meet head-on. And if it came to that, the outcome was obvious. If Zerozaki Hitoshiki was a homicidal monster, then Aikawa Jun was the ultimate monster hunter. Having a bit of a penchant for taking lives was great for drawing attention, but it wouldn't be enough to stop her from sniffing him out. The nature of this scarlet woman was one so transcendental, so elevated, that if there was one thing you didn't want to do, it was make an enemy of her.

And making friends with her didn't serve as a very good plan B. If there was any one saving grace, it was that she had a sense of the whimsical. But it was hardly something that could be exploited.

"I wonder if he'll get away . . ."

I was just a little worried. Not to mention incredibly sympathetic.

But I didn't give it too much thought.

I had little interest in something that was to take place a world away from here. Even if it was happening to my own mirror image.

Now was the time to think about my own world.

I took the envelope from Kunagisa in my hand.

Me, narrator,
and Aoii Mikoko,
classmate.

5

CALLOUS

Black and White

Ilikeyoulikeyouloveyoulots.

1

On Saturday, May twenty-first, I woke up early in the morning.

"Time to get up."

I had had some kind of nasty dream. It seemed like I was about to be killed, and like I was also trying to kill someone. My entire body was being controlled by the sheer will to commit harm, and at the same time, I was *being* harmed. I ran and I ran and I ran and I ran and I ran, but sooner or later the figure chasing after me turned out to be myself, and I was gripped with terror. Certain death was just behind me, and yet it was strangely exhilarating. It was that kind of awful dream.

The sheer fact that I couldn't remember it made it a nightmare, and the fact that it was a nightmare made this a rude awakening.

I rose up from my futon and checked the time. Five fifty in the morning. My plans with Mikoko-chan weren't until ten o'clock, so I still had roughly four hours to kill. With nothing in particular to do, I folded up my futon and pushed it into the closet.

I went outside, thinking it might be nice to go for a run for the first time in awhile. I locked up just to be safe, but with a lock of this quality, Aikawa-san wasn't the only one who could easily break in if so inclined. Not that there was anything in that place I'd mind having stolen.

I ran east down Imadegawa Street and turned back once Dôshisha University had come into view. I went directly back to my apartment and changed out of my sweaty clothes. Why, oh why had I thought it would be a good idea to run in this heat? I wondered with the usual remorse.

I picked up the book I had borrowed from the school library and reread the part I had previously stopped in the middle of. That alone ate through a good chunk of time, so from there I picked up the envelope from Kunagisa, the contents of which I had already glanced over a few times.

The envelope contained police documents. Through what means Kunagisa had obtained such a thing, I didn't know, but we had sort of a don't ask, don't tell policy. What I did know, however, was that Kunagisa could access pretty much any place with electricity running through it, and that within her circle of friends were criminals who knew just about everything in the entire Milky Way galaxy. Of course, normally I had little interest in criminal investigation. But these were documents on the murder of Emoto Tomoe.

"But come on . . ."

I flipped through the paper-clipped sheets of A4 paper.

There wasn't really any new information. The documents elaborated on some of the more minor details, but most of them seemed irrelevant, and it was all more or less what Sasaki-san had told me. I was a little bit shattered to realize

that this was what I had endured Aikawa-san's interrogation for.

Still, it wasn't a complete waste. There was some information I hadn't been aware of, and it was worth knowing.

"So here we have alibi relations."

As logic may have dictated, the four classmates who had been with Emoto Tomoe the night she died (us, that is) were the prime suspects. Nevertheless, all four of us had alibis, at least for the time being. Miiko-san next door had graciously vouched for Mikoko-chan and me, while Muimi-chan and Akiharu-kun were vouching for each other. The possibility that they had committed the crime in cahoots was present, but based on the police's observations, that didn't seem to be the case. Sasaki-san had made it sound like Muimi-chan and Akiharu-kun went to karaoke, just the two of them, but apparently other people from school had been present as well. In other words, Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan had a sound alibi, just like Mikoko-chan and I. If anyone had a weak alibi, it was me. After all, Miiko-san could only vouch for what she heard (or didn't hear) through the apartment walls.

But of course, *I* knew I wasn't the killer.

"Okay then, that's all clear . . ."

Next was the list of items in the apartment. When I snuck in with Zerozaki, I didn't think anything was missing, but apparently I was wrong. The police documents gave a complete list of everything inside Tomo-chan's apartment, from the largest piece of furniture to the smallest accessory. It was like the concept of privacy no longer even existed, but at the same time, it gave you a good idea of who this Emoto Tomo character was.

It was just that on this list, one thing was missing—the liquid-filled capsule neckstrap Akiharu-kun had given Tomoe-chan as a birthday present.

I had seen him give it to her with my own eyes, so it was strange that it wasn't on the list. The most logical explanation to come to mind was that the killer had taken it, but that just raised the question of why the killer would want such a thing.

"It wasn't exactly worth a lot. . . ."

Meanwhile, the cell phone she had used to call me had apparently been found in her pocket. The documents included corroboration of the call based on the call history in her phone's memory.

No foreign objects had appeared in her apartment either. Evidently the killer had left with the think cloth allegedly used to strangle her.

"Cloth . . . cloth . . . cloth, eh?"

Next was a thoroughly documented account of Mikoko's discovery of the body, which was information I hadn't been able to draw out of her. She had visited Tomo-chan's apartment in the morning and called her room on the intercom. But there was no answer. She wouldn't pick up her phone either. Thinking this was strange, Mikoko made her way through the autolocked door as one of the other residents was leaving and headed to Tomo-chan's room. The door to the entrance wasn't locked. I had feared we might have another damned sealed room on our hands, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"And finally."

That *x* over *y* writing.

The police had deemed this the "work of the perpetrator," which made sense. Sasaki-san said herself that Emoto Tomoe

had died instantly, so it didn't make sense that she could've written a dying message. This was something I had realized in time as well. Once again, this raised the question of why the killer would do such a thing. Leaving a sign at the crime scene—this was no Jack the Ripper after all.

"And that's the end of that."

Those were the facts I had deemed useful. But overall, my ideas on the case remained largely unchanged.

And that was fine, I thought.

Based on this information, a number of minute possibilities had been crossed out. From here I would gradually narrow down the remaining possibilities. But for the time being, it was safe to say that a basic process of reasoning was starting to take form.

"But still . . ."

What the hell was I doing? Why did I have to do all this stuff?

Was it for Tomo-chan?

Or for Mikoko-chan?

Going as far as obtaining these documents, dedicating copious amounts of time—what the hell was I doing?

"I ought to talk to Sasaki-san again, huh . . ."

There were some things I wanted to ask. Some possibilities left to be narrowed down. I wouldn't use the word *solution* until I had something 100 percent watertight.

I slid the papers back into the envelope, tore the envelope to pieces, and threw it all into the garbage. In the unlikely event that somebody caught a look at these documents, there would be trouble. Besides, having perused them pretty thoroughly, most of the information had been committed to memory already.

Now then.

There was still a little over an hour until Mikoko-chan would be here. Two hours, if you factored in her lack of punctuality.

I lay down on the floor and thought a bit more.

About the murder?

No.

About my own ridiculousness.

Luckily, there was still plenty of time.

Life had only just begun.

2

Mikoko-chan showed up on time.

"I'm not late today!" she said, giving a gleeful German salute with both hands. Though it was probably a given at this point, she was so hyper that you might think she had blown a circuit. She was dressed in a tight tank top and large, loose overalls. She also had her head deeply inserted into a yellow hat that looked like it belonged on a kindergartener (not to be mean or anything). There was something adorable about her reddish hair peeking out from under the brim. The tank top was just a bit too small, making it look like she was wearing overalls directly over nothing, which was, well, how do you say . . . actually, I guess I didn't mind.

"Well, shall we go?"

I started to leave, but she immediately stopped me. "Oh, wait-wait-wait," she said, pushing me back into the room and entering herself without being invited. She had done this last time too. Maybe invading houses was one of her hobbies. Not a very sociable one, if you asked me.

"I brought you a little something today. To say thanks for spending the day with me."

No sooner had she said it than she opened her bag—a Boston bag different from her usual purse—and pulled out a lunch-box-like item wrapped in a bandana. She unwrapped it to reveal that it was actually Tupperware.

"Wow, what is it?"

"Treats," she said boastfully, and opened it up. Inside were six pieces of sweet potato shaped like Mont Blanc. I could tell by the slight indents that these were handmade.

"Wow, so you do baking and stuff."

"Yup. But don't expect it to taste too good or anything."

"Can I eat 'em?"

"Of course. Oh, right." She pulled a thermos out of her bag, handed me a cup, and poured the contents of it. It was black tea, and Marco Polo, no less. So she had even come prepared to compensate for the fact that I didn't have anything besides water here. This girl didn't let anything get by her.

She prepared herself a cup of tea as well, and flashed a nice smile. "Well, cheers."

I clinked glasses with her and popped a piece of sweet potato. Unfathomable sweetness immediately spread throughout the inside of my mouth. Of course they weren't called *sweet* potatoes for nothing, but this didn't seem like an ordinary amount of sugar to me.

"Pretty sweet, huh?" I said, letting my true impressions show.

"Yep. I looove sweet stuff."

"You don't say." I nodded and popped the next one in my mouth. Yup. Sweet. Come to think of it, I hadn't had any breakfast that morning, so this was quite the convenient little

surprise. But hey, hadn't Mikoko-chan said she didn't like sweet stuff before? It seemed to me like she may or may not have said that at one point. I couldn't seem to remember.

Well, whatever.

She was a girl, after all. You know how fickle they can be.

Within five minutes, the sweet potatoes had been completely consumed.

"Mikoko-chan, you're pretty good at cooking and stuff, huh?"

"Yep. It's because I was a latchkey kid."

"What's a . . . latchkey kid?"

"Uhh, it means a kid who's home alone a lot. Kids whose parents both work have to bring a house key with them to school, right?"

"Why?"

"Um, because if nobody's home, the door is going to be locked, right?" she continued, looking rather perplexed. "So that's why they call them latchkey kids."

"Oh . . . I get it."

I broke my eye contact with Mikoko-chan and stared up at the ceiling to hide my facial expression.

Well how about that, I thought. So households like that exist.

"Ikkun, did I say something wrong?"

"Huh? Why?"

"You're making a really weird face right now."

She didn't sound so much worried as nervous, almost frightened, even. I shook my head and said, "No, it's nothing." Yup, nothing at all. Why should something like that bother me?

"So should we really go now? Where do you want to go?"

"Huh?"

"You wanted to go shopping, right? I think that's what you said. Shinkyôgoku? Kyoto Station? Or do you want to go all the way to Osaka?"

"Oh. Umm. Umm."

She started to get flustered, as if she hadn't even thought about it. Her eyes darted around looking for something or someone to save her, but ultimately looked back at me and said, "Uh, a-anywhere is fine."

What did *that* mean?

"You can't mean that. You're the one doing the shopping."

"There isn't any place in particular you want to go with me?"

"There isn't really anything I need. Living in a room like this, I only have space to buy things you can throw out quick. It wouldn't make any sense to go shopping. Not that I'm against nonsense. There just really isn't anything I need to buy. What is it you wanted to buy?"

"Uh, well, you know, clothes and stuff."

"Huh."

"And I want to eat somewhere."

"Well, then I guess Kawara-machi's the way to go."

"Okay," she said.

I may not be the assertive type, but Mikoko-chan might have been even worse. Why did I have to decide where she would go shopping? Of course, such questions were pointless.

"Okay, let's go," I said, and we left the room together. We walked for a bit until arriving at the Senbon Nakadachiuri bus stop, where we stood and waited for the Shijôkawara-machi bus. Within five minutes, the 46 line bus had arrived. We got

on and found a lucky pair of empty seats. We sat down with me on the inside and her beside me.

"By the way, you came on your Vespa, right?"

"Yeah, my Vespa. My Vespa," she said, looking a bit nervous. It seemed my previous anger had left a strong impression on her. I wondered if I might have gone too far last time, but there are times when even I can't hold back my emotions.

In fact, it happens a lot.

"So you'll have to come back to get it . . ."

"It's okay. As long as I take the bus, the price is the same! It's a flat fare within city limits!"

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

"So you're not planning to buy a car or scooter or anything?"

"Nah. Things aren't particularly inconvenient without one."

"Hmm . . ." She nodded ambiguously. "Tomo-chan was the same way. She had a license, but she didn't have any wheels. She said she just wanted to use it as a proof of identification."

"Yeah, that's basically what I'm doing."

"I see. Maybe everyone's like that. But I want to start driving once I get my license."

Come to think of it, I did seem to remember her saying something about going to driving school and getting her dad to buy her a car once she had a license.

"I drive on occasion too," I said. "Sometimes I borrow Miiko-san's car."

"Mm-hm."

The instant I brought up Miiko-san, Mikoko-chan's expression grew terribly bored. By this point, even I had come

to learn that Mikoko-chan wasn't someone with whom you could have a good conversation about Miiko-san.

"Wow, so Tomo-chan had a license too."

"Yup. For what it's worth."

"I see. Hey, by the way, did you go to school yesterday and the day before?"

"Yup. Didn't see you there, for some reason."

That was because I *didn't* go to school yesterday and the day before. With those documents from Kunagisa in hand, I had a lot of things to think about. It wasn't that my role as a student was my lowest priority or anything, but it wasn't my top one either.

"I met up with Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan, though. I talked to them about the idea of having an event in Tomo-chan's honor. You've got to come out when we do it."

For a moment, for just a single instant, I hesitated. "Yeah, for sure. Be sure to invite me," I replied. I couldn't tell if I was genuinely agreeing, or if I was just saying that because I was on the spot. Knowing my personality, it was more likely the latter, but in this particular case, just maybe it was the former.

We arrived in Shijôkawara-machi and got off the bus.

"Ooookay! Today, we get crazy!" she declared, stretching out both her arms. And then she flashed me the most beautiful, awe-inspiring, liberated smile I had ever seen in my life.

"Say good-bye to the dark stuff. Today we're having fun! Right, Ikkun?!"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Yeah! Mikoko-chan, full speed ahead!"

For the next six hours, Mikoko-chan did just as she'd declared, running around Shinkyôgoku from one end to the other, almost as if she really had forgotten about Tomo-chan.

Skipping and hopping around.

Frolicking about.

Vanquishing evil.

Going wild.

Joking around.

Almost crazily.

Almost like she was broken.

Almost like shad had somehow faded.

Like she had melted away.

Dancing madly.

Flying about.

Spiraling.

Like she was scrambling for something.

Like something was holding her back.

Like she was on a self-abusive binge, and yet still somehow mistakable for a pixie.

Like an innocent child, utterly free of sin.

A wholly pure existence.

Freely expressing her emotions—laughing, losing her temper, and at times even lamenting with watery eyes, only to return once again to that joyful smile.

Even I, even I, just some guy who happened to be there.

Me, Mr. Damaged Goods.

Or perhaps she had already made up her mind to confront her destiny. For me, the one who couldn't save her—no, who *didn't* save her—this was nothing more than an excuse, but I still couldn't help wondering.

Was she already aware of her fate?

"Wow, time just flies by, doesn't it? I can't believe it."

"Well, it's like Einstein said. There's a world of different between a minute spent with a pretty girl and a minute spent

with your hand on a stove," I said, as if Einstein were an old friend of mine.

"Huh?!" Mikoko-chan said with a look of pure triumph. "Could it be? Are you saying you think that I'm pretty?"

"Well, I don't suppose I'd deny it," I said, simply for the sake of the conversation. If there was one thing today had taught me, it was that giving her too direct of a response would result in me getting dragged into something unnecessary.

I currently had three paper shopping bags in my right hand, two in my left, and two plastic bags on my back. They were mostly filled with clothes, so none of it was all that heavy, but it sure was a shock to see Mikoko-chan throw her ten-thousand-yen bills away one after another. Kunagisa was a big shopper too, but in her case it was all online from home, so the reality of seeing someone splurging this heavily right before my eyes was a fairly fresh experience for me.

"Well, then . . . should we eat something and then go back?"

"Yeah, yeah! Wowww!"

"What?"

"I'm so happy you asked me!" she said with a big grin.

She was really hyper today. Why was she so damn happy?

From there, we went into a place in Kiya-machi that was sort of a cross between a Japanese-style pub and a coffee shop. The interior was decorated to look like a prison, with the staff dressed in prisoner or policewoman costumes, but despite the place's peculiarities, the food and the prices were both decent. I had come here once before with Miiko-san once, during which we deemed it one of the top three restaurants in town, but that was probably the kind of thing I shouldn't bother

telling Mikoko-chan. Aikawa-san would only take me to Japanese bars that only served Japanese liquor, Kunagisa only ate junk food, and pretty much everyone else I knew was finicky. If I really thought about it, having someone I could go to places like this with was something to be cherished.

A (fake) policewoman showed us to our cell, where we sat down.

"Would you care for something to drink?" she said. Mikoko-chan ordered a cocktail, and I a glass of oolong tea.

"You really don't drink, huh?"

"It's kind of a policy. Like how Muimi-chan doesn't smoke in front of nonsmokers."

"Haha, that's right! You know, it was actually Tomo-chan who asked her to stop. Tomo-chan rarely demanded anything from her friends, so even Muimi-chan listened to her just like that."

"Come to think of it, she doesn't seem the type to care much about whether or not she's disturbing others, normally."

"Yeah, but you know, she said she's quitting."

"Huh."

"It'll be good for her health!" she said, sweeping away the darkness about to form. At the same time, the drinks finally arrived. The waitress placed the cocktail in front of me and the oolong tea in front of Mikoko-chan. We ignored this for the time being and placed our order.

"So you've been friends with Muimi-chan since elementary school, huh?" I said.

"Yup. And even then she was a smoker."

"And yet she's pretty tall."

"Yup. But I'll bet she would've been even taller if she hadn't smoked." Such a thing was virtually unimaginable.

"You know, she used to be a bully. She reformed some time during high school."

"That's pretty late."

"She met Tomo-chan, and, well, some things happened. You know, yadda yadda yadda."

Some things.

Yeah, I'll bet some things happened. They had certainly spent enough time together.

"What about you?" I said.

"Hm?"

"You make it sound like Tomo-chan really had a big influence on Muimi-chan, but what about you? And Akiharu-kun?"

She fell silent for a moment, then let out a deep sigh. "You know, I always thought human relationships were all about the long term," she said. "You spend a long time getting to know a person, and then one day you start to click. That's what I thought. But I was wrong. I was wrong, Ikkun. You don't need to know somebody for a long time or to 'click' in order to be drawn to a person."

"Why do you think Tomo-chan was killed?"

"H . . . how would I know something like that?" She hung her head down. "There was no reason Tomo-chan had to die. There wasn't a single possible reason for killing her."

"I think the reason people kill one another is actually quite simple," I said, ignoring her. "Interference. If some factor is interfering with your life, the logical next step is to try and weed it out. It's just like kicking stones off a railway track."

"But Tomo-chan—"

"Yup, Tomo-chan made it a point never to overstep people's boundaries or be invasive. In other words, there was no

reason for her to have been considered an interference to anybody. She was too far out of range to begin with."

"Uh-huh."

"To put it another way, she wasn't even in a position to become the object of somebody's ill will or enmity or malice. Thus, there was no reason for somebody to kill her. She wasn't disturbing anybody."

You're only living,
and that's causing
disturbance to others.

"But it's not that simple. I mean, Tomo-chan wasn't some hermit living in the forests of Mount Fuji. She was a normal university student, living a normal university student's life. As such, she had to form personal relationships, whether she liked it or not. Now let me pose you a question, Mikoko-chan, and please answer with your own opinion. What does it mean to form a personal relationship?"

"Umm . . ." she said, seeming a bit perplexed. "Well, I can't say for sure, but it's like getting close to somebody, I think."

"Yes, that's right. That's absolutely right, Mikoko-chan. Now if you were to go and rephrase that, it essentially means 'choosing somebody.' But let's think about that for a minute. To choose someone means to *not* choose somebody else. The act of 'choosing' and the act of 'not choosing' are just opposite sides of the same coin. I'm not talking about things like how you can only have one best friend or one lover. Such dilemmas are irrelevant here. What I'm talking about is that it's logically impossible for a human being to be liked by everyone, to be able to get close to anybody he or she hasn't chosen."

"Hmm . . . It may be hard—to be liked by everyone, I mean—but I don't think it's impossible. Maybe not everyone in the *world*, but I think it's at least possible with the people directly surrounding you."

"I don't think it is. That's what I believe. People aren't all as kind as you think. There are monsters out there who only view other people as subjects to be dissected. There are blue things that can only process the world in terms of zeros and ones. There are Mankind's Greatest ladies who are cynical about everything in the whole world, not to *mention* other people. There are fortune-tellers who have seen all hope and all despair in the entire world and still go on sneering away. Artists who view their very existence—not to mention the existence of others—as nothing more than elements in her style. There are even people who can only accept human beings as either good or evil."

". . ."

"Now don't you think Tomo-chan's awareness of this was the reason she chose to avoid forming deep relationships with people? She was trying to make as few enemies as possible."

"Tomo-chan wasn't . . . that kind of girl," Mikoko-chan said, fading in and out, but I mostly didn't hear her. It seemed she knew herself that such a claim had no basis. "But even if that was true, the fact remains that she was killed."

"You're right. Tomo-chan made sure never to fall in too deep with anybody, and yet at the same time, she showed superb skill in not letting it show."

It was the very thing I was incapable of.

No matter how hard I tried.

"But despite all that, she was murdered anyway. Tomo-chan was murdered. Now at this point, Mikoko-chan, let's

take a look at this serial killer who's become such a sensation as of late. This guy is an *indiscriminate* murderer. Just falling into his field of vision or, conversely, *not* falling into his field of vision, just happening to bump him on the shoulder, or even *not* bumping him on the shoulder is enough of a reason for him to kill you. He kills mechanically. Automatically. For a killer like that, even Tomo-chan is a possible target. Even I am."

"So then Tomo-chan was killed by the slasher?"

"Apparently not. According to Sasaki-san—that detective, I mean. Apparently, that's the one thing that they know for sure. Now then, if I might change the subject a little bit, let me ask you this: Haven't you ever thought there were just too many people in the world?"

Taken aback by the suddenness of my question, she looked away. Nevertheless, I silently waited for her answer.

"But that doesn't mean you can just kill people," she said. "Ikkun, could you ever forgive someone for murder?"

"No," I answered without hesitation. "It's not a matter of forgiving or not forgiving. There's a far more fundamental issue. That is, the fact that murder is the absolute worst thing. That I can confirm. The desire to take a life is the most despicable human emotion. To hope and pray and wish for another person's death is a hopelessly evil act. It is a sin beyond redemption. It's an atrocity beyond apology, and I'll be damned if it has anything to do with forgiveness."

My voice was so rigid and merciless, I didn't even sound like me.

Complete nonsense.

Who was really the hopeless one here?

"Anybody who's taken a life belongs in Hell, without exception."

"B . . . but . . ." She gulped in terror at my bold declaration, but managed to muster up an objection nevertheless. "Like, what if the person was in danger? Like what if you were walking around Kamogawa Park at night, and then this Kyoto prowler guy came at you with a knife? Would you just sit there and let him kill you?"

"No, I suppose I would resist."

"Right?"

"You're right. And I might even use too much force and accidentally kill him. The same thing goes for me as goes for everyone else. But I would also realize in that moment, when I'm taking somebody else's in order to preserve my own—I would realize my own sinfulness. I would acknowledge that I'm guilty of a sin so deep that it won't even be forgiven when I'm dead."

"But you were going to be killed! It's only natural to defend yourself in a situation like that, right?"

"If you start thinking like that, you've already committed the sin. Let's make one thing clear right now," I said sternly. "I am capable of murder."

". . ."

"Whether it be for my own sake or for someone else's, I could slaughter another human being. I could eradicate another life, whether it be a friend or a family member. Why do you think that is?"

"Why? I don't know," she said anxiously. "I don't think that's true. You're a kind guy. I don't think you could do those things."

"I can. Without a doubt. The reason is that I can't comprehend other people's pain."

". . ."

"For example, I have a certain female friend who lacks most of the basic human emotions. She's always super-happy, having fun no matter what she's doing, but that's only because she doesn't know any other emotion. As a result, she can barely comprehend when other people get sad or angry."

It was the only way she could process the world. Never able to distinguish between paradise and paradise lost.

"I'm the same way. No, I'm much worse. I can't understand the pain of others even a little bit. Why? Because I myself can't properly interpret my own feelings of 'pain' or 'suffering.' The thought of dying doesn't even bother me. It's not that I *want* to die, but my will to resist it is abnormally low. And thus this leads to what I was saying.

"There are a variety of 'stoppers' that prevent people from killing one another. One of the most vital ones is having thoughts like, 'Gee, this probably hurts,' or 'Man, I feel sorry for this guy.' Isn't that right? It is. For example, I'm sure you've gotten the urge to hurt somebody before, right? But you probably didn't actually beat the crap out of them or anything, did you?"

"Mm. I've never hit someone before."

"But I'll bet you've *wanted* to before, right?"

She didn't answer. This was the clearest confirmation she could've given. But this was no crime. Nobody can go through life without ever harboring ill will toward someone, even if you're up in Heaven.

"I guess basically I'm talking about an ability to feel *empathy*. You understand the other person's emotions, you feel

mercy for them, and you conform to them. Of course, this isn't always a good thing. Jealousy and envy both have empathy at their root. An understanding of another person's emotions. It's both a merit and a demerit."

And if, like the woman on that island, you knew *everyone's* emotions, all you could do was break down.

"But let's not wax philosophical about loss and gain, here," I said. "The point here is that I don't have these 'stoppers.' I can't make head or tail of people's emotions. As a result, I have to suppress myself. Doing so proves to be incredibly agonizing. It's not even funny. But somehow I've managed to keep the demons down."

I had some nerve, living life while harboring such a monster within myself.

"Ikkun . . ."

"I could reach my limit any day now. And *that* is why I can't forgive a murderer. How could I? The very existence of a murderer is detestable. Deplorable. I hate all murderers from the bottom of my heart. I hate them heartily. I think I'd like to crush them all."

". . ."

"Just kidding, I don't think that at all," I said.

Our food arrived. Mikoko-chan ordered more alcohol, and I a glass of water. We sat for a while eating our food in silence.

"Say, Ikkun . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Why are you telling me all this stuff?" she said, suspiciously. It had been such a fun day.

Silently, I shook my head. It was no doubt a terribly cold gesture. "I just figured you might want to hear it. Was I

wrong? No, right? And, well, I wanted you to know the extent to which I was damaged goods."

"Damaged goods? How can you say such a terrible thing? And about yourself!"

"It's because it's about myself that I can say it. If I'm not damaged goods, then I'm at least a human failure. Don't you think? Actually, people tell me that a lot. Anyone who's grown even slightly close to me has said so. 'You're out of your mind,' they say. 'Abnormal.' 'A heretic.' 'Grotesque.' 'Shoddy.' And those are all correct."

"Ikkun . . ." Mikoko-chan said nervously. "You sound like you're headed for suicide."

"I won't commit suicide. I promised."

"You . . . promised?"

"Yeah. To the first person I killed."

A pause.

I popped a cube of steak in my mouth. "Just kidding," I said. "Un fortunately, my life isn't that exciting. And I'm not romantic enough to make such an incredible promise. I'm just an ordinary guy who's missing some vital component. The actual reason I won't commit suicide is that, well, it just looks bad. You know, like I'm running from my own flaws. Of course, I *am* running from my flaws, but I don't want to *look* like I am."

"Ikkun, I know you're not like other people, but . . . if you killed yourself, I would cry. I know I would. Forget about what you're missing. You're living a normal life, aren't you?"

"Broken things can be fixed. Things that are simply inadequate can't."

Mikoko-chan let out a deep sigh. "It's like I'm talking to Tomo-chan."

"Hmm? Did she talk about this kind of thing a lot?"

"Well, not really. I mean, she didn't open up to people that much. But if we ever had a 'real' conversation, I'm sure it would've been something like this."

"In that case . . ."

In that case, it was truly regrettable. I felt all the more like I should have had a serious talk with Emoto Tomoe.

If I had . . . if I had?

What if I had?

Who would have been saved? Did I actually think she might have been saved? As if.

Rather, wasn't it *because* we had talked that she had . . .

"You know, about Tomo-chan," I said without looking up at Mikoko-chan. "I don't think she would resent the person who killed her. I'm sure she doesn't, not even a little bit."

". . . Why do you think that?"

"Eh, just a hunch. No other reason. But that's what I think. I'm sure she's not the type to resent others."

I even had the gall to use present tense instead of past.

Present tense.

"Of course, they say she was strangled from behind, so she probably didn't even see the killer's face. I don't suppose she could have resented the killer even if she wanted to, I said.

"The killer's . . . face . . ." Mikoko-chan repeated. "The person who killed her . . ."

"But Tomo-chan probably wouldn't have had any interest in something like that anyway. I mean, no matter who kills you, the outcome is the same. In the end, being killed is nothing more than just that. The fact that you die doesn't change, no matter whose fault it is. Plus, Tomo-chan was like me—she had little resistance to the idea of death in the first place. I can

say this with a fair degree of certainty. She didn't seem to like herself very much. She told me so that day. She wants to be reborn as you."

Hearing that, Mikoko-chan looked like she was about to cry. She managed to hold back the tears, but she continued speaking Tomo-chan's name softly to herself for some time.

"Tomo-chan . . . Tomo-chan . . . Tomo-chan."

I watched this, unmoved. Honestly, truly, completely without emotion.

"Mikoko-chan, who do you think did it?"

"You know, you sure do seem hung up on that," she said with just a hint of suspicion. "Have you been investigating or something?"

"Yes," I answered honestly. "Well, not so much investigating as wanting to know. I want to meet whoever did it. I want to ask some questions. Or rather, I want to *interrogate* this person. You know, like, 'Can you justify your own existence?' "

"Ikkun," Mikoko-chan said, "You're really scary, aren't you?"

"Am I? I personally don't think so, but maybe I am."

"You apply your own rules to other people. I don't know how to describe it. It's like while you view yourself as one part of the world, you view *all* people as like . . . the world's gears. No, not gears. If a gear goes missing, the whole machine breaks down, but you don't care if a person or two disappears."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I really don't think you're the kind of person who could just kill someone, Ikkun. But I'll bet you also don't hesitate to tell someone to die."

"..."

"Am I right? I mean, asking the person who killed Tomo-chan a question like that is the same as saying, 'You don't deserve to live.' It's cruel. It's so cruel. Ikkun, do you realize that?"

"Yes," I shot back. "I'm fully aware of that. I'm as aware of my own sins and of my own nonsense-sputtering nature as I am of the fact that *I'm* the one who belongs in the depths of Hell. Someone once told me that most murders are the result of a person 'going too far' or 'using too much force,' but in my case, I'm fully capable of fully premeditated murder. I'm one of the rare, deplorable breed of people who can take a life without any need for self-approval or self-deception or self-denial or self-satisfaction."

"You sure are self-hating, though."

"I'm a masochist," I said casually. "And an extremely nasty one, at that. But that's my way, my style, my assertion. And I have no intention of giving that up."

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

She looked a bit sad.

It was as if she were looking at somebody in the distance.

Somebody who was already gone.

An ephemeral, painful gaze.

Her expression.

Her aura.

Surely it was because she never hid her emotions, nor even tried to do so.

I could understand.

I could comprehend.

It almost felt like I had gone and understood somebody's feelings.

"But that's . . ." she said.
This was, among other things:
A feeling of affection.
A lovely presence.
An utterance of sentiment.
A truly aloof air.
A truly casual aura.
A singular impossibility.
An inability to remain apathetic.
A dazzling nightmare.
A feeling like reality itself would distort and collapse.
I desired a partner. I faced my partner.
The pleasure of being beaten down.
The pleasure of being run through.
The ecstasy of being dismembered.
Cut into little bits and pieces.
A vital component-stealing,
Heart-clutching,
Mind-penetrating
Smile.
"That's the Ikkun I love," she said.

3

A single, thuggish-looking person was crouched down in front of my apartment. I approached closer, wondering who it could be, only to discover (as half-expected, I suppose) that it was Aikawa-san. Her hairstyle had changed a bit since Wednesday, suggesting she had gotten it cut. It was a slick style like the kind celebrities sometimes get, where the bangs in front form a perfectly straight line above the brow. With her already

extraordinary proportions, the new hairstyle made her look even more like a model. If only she hadn't been squatting like some high school thug.

"Yo," she said upon noticing me. She stood up and came to greet me. She had a heartless, somehow catlike sneer on her face. "So how was your date?"

"You were watching us?"

"I just spotted you in Shinkyôgoku. So I came here to make fun of you."

"I . . . see."

How much free time did this woman have? I was amazed. She was completely ungraspable. There was no way to guess what she might do next. A wily phantom of a woman.

"So you cut your hair, huh? Looking for a change of pace?"

"To be more accurate, I *got* it cut," she said as she tweaked her bangs.

"Well, yeah, I suppose."

"Yup. Like this"—*flick*—"with a survival knife. If I had dodged a second later, I wouldn't have my left eye anymore. I gotta admit, even I was scared."

She must have gone to the worst hairstylist ever.

"I figure I might keep it short for a while. What do you think? Does it work?"

"Aikawa-san, any hairstyle would look good on you. You're a beautiful woman."

"Aw, you're too sweet. But how many goddamn times do I have to tell you not to call me by my last name?"

She put me in a headlock and noogied my brains out before letting me go again. Then she flashed me that wicked smile.

You couldn't hold anything against this woman. If you did, you'd never get away with it.

"So? How was your date? What's going on with that younger girl? Hmm? Hmm? Come on, talk to me. If you've got a problem, I can give you advice."

"I think you've got it all wrong, er, Jun-san. She's just one of the people involved in this murder case."

"Hmm? Oh. Really. Then . . . by any chance was it Aoii Mikoko?" I nodded. Her face went blank. "Hmm," she said. "I see. Well, either way, I guess if you're already back at this hour, you don't have much of a chance."

Incidentally, it was eleven o'clock.

Mikoko-chan had imbibed a ridiculous amount of alcohol, with all the inevitable consequences. She passed out in the middle of the restaurant. I hoisted her onto my back and took her all the way back to Horikawa Oike, entered her apartment, put her to bed, locked up, and took the bus back home. This time she didn't look like she was fake-sleeping.

"Too bad, young'un. Want me to console you?" she teased with genuine amusement.

"I'm telling you, it's not like that . . . and more important"—I decided to change the subject before I had another annoyance to deal with —"so about this hairdresser who did your bangs—was it Zerozaki, by any chance?"

". . ."

Her facial expression distorted.

And became one of sheet delight.

"Yeah. Hell of a kid, lemme tell you. Still only a second-rate killer, but as a knife wielder, he's as good as they come. He knows exactly how a human has to move which muscles for maximum speed. And take a look at this," she said, rolling

up her right sleeve. Her arm was wrapped in white bandages, stained with crimson blood from underneath. "And he walked away with hardly a scratch. Seriously, that's one hell of a kid. I guess he's living up to the 'Zerozaki' name."

". . . Is he even tougher than you?"

"It's not a matter of tough or weak. In terms of sheet strength, I'm proud to say I'm several tiers above him. I'll admit that he is frighteningly quick, but he's still a hundred years too slow to deal with me."

Aikawa-san, ever the narcissist. The possessor of unrivaled confidence.

"Still, when he's dead set on escaping, he's really something. He was unexpectedly calm too. As a homicidal monster, I figured he'd be a little more hot-blooded. But he was just like you said."

"How do you mean?"

"He's *identical* to you. I can't exactly put my finger on one specific similarity, but he's just like you," she said, her voice full of cynicism. "The sick masochistic freak and the sick sadistic freak. It's a match made in freaking Heaven."

"So in other words . . ." I said, choosing my words as carefully as was humanly possible, "Er, in other words, you found Zerozaki and you let him get away?"

"Hmm?!" She grinned creepily and pinched both of my cheeks. "I'm sorry, did I just hear something come out of this mouth right here? Huh? What was that? Aikawa Jun is just some girl who likes to go around bluffing about herself, you say?"

"No, I didn't mean that. First of all, there's no way you still pass for a 'girl' . . ."

Squeeze.

Huh. Who knew the elasticity of a human cheek was so high?

"Eh, I guess you're right," she said, suddenly releasing my face. She scratched the top of her head with a bored expression. "I guess I've still got some things to learn. Oh, I wonder if that tattoo face is still in Kyoto."

"If I were Zerozaki, I definitely would've fled to another prefecture."

"Yeah, I know," she said, slumping her shoulders. "Oh, what a hassle. Not that I had any intention of letting him get away."

Seeing the icy cold look in her eyes as she said this, I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Zerozaki after all. Aikawa-san looked pretty damn persistent.

"Well, I'm done bothering ya," she said. She stretched out her back and began to leave. Evidently she had come on foot today instead of in the Cobra. "Or rather, I'm done trying and failing to bother you. Well, whichever. Good night. Let's both have sweet dreams."

"Jun-san. Can I ask you something?" I said to her back.

"What?"

"Could you forgive a murderer?"

"Huh? What kind of question is that? Is this some sort of metaphor?"

"Eh, well, to say it more directly . . . do you think it's okay for one person to kill another?"

"Yup, I do." She answered immediately and firmly. "People who are supposed to die should die. Heh heh," she laughed cynically. "Like let's say you kill me. Just relax, dammit. The world goes on," she continued coolly, then waved a hand at me and disappeared from view.

Geez.

"...."

If only I could be so defiant. So filled to the brim with cynicism. How wonderful it would be.

"I really am half-baked."

I was sick of myself.

Not just sick, disgusted.

"But either way, Aikawa-san, it's all just nonsense."

I went inside my apartment building and managed to make it to my door without running into anyone. I reached into my pocket to get my key when I felt a foreign object inside. I pulled it out and took a look.

It was Mikoko-chan's apartment key.

"...."

In order to get her back inside, I had taken it out of her bag without asking her. I couldn't just leave the door unlocked, so I had borrowed the key to lock up. At first I considered dropping the key through the mail slot, but it was attached to the same key ring as the Vespa key, so I ended up bringing it home, deciding to just drop it off tomorrow along with the Vespa. It wasn't like I just wanted an excuse to try out the Vespa.

"Besides, the Vespa and the key aren't the only things I have to drop off."

I might have been antisocial, clueless, and kind of a big jerk, but spending that much time face-to-face with someone, you couldn't just ignore them.

Aoii Mikoko.

"I remember, Mikoko-chan."

I entered my room and lay down on the floor without even bothering to set out the futon.

It was my first day of college after coming back from that ridiculous island. I didn't know right from left in regards to the Japanese schooling system, and it was Mikoko-chan who was the first one to strike up a conversation with me.

"Nice to meet you! Is there anything you don't understand?" She was beaming with friendliness. This was the caring gesture of a girl looking out for a classmate who had gotten a late start.

I was horribly irritated. And just a little grateful. Because somewhere in that bright, innocent aura, echoed a slight resemblance to that precious friend of mine.

This is a real masterpiece," I said like Zerozaki Hitoshiki, and closed my eyes.

No thinking about tomorrow.

No thinking about the case.

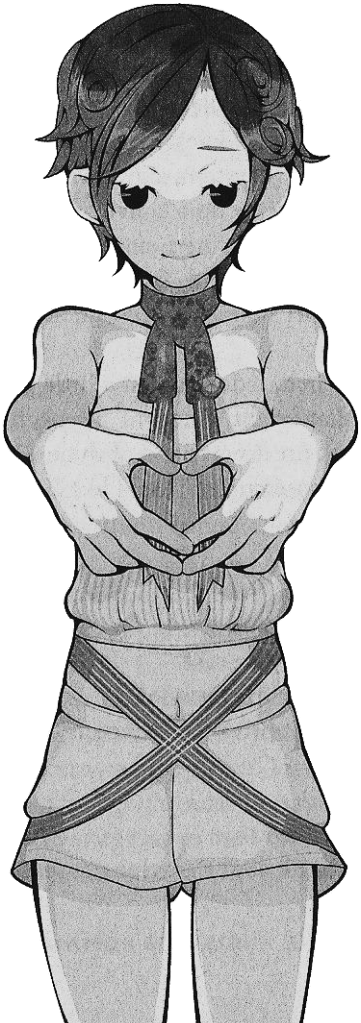
No thinking about the prowler.

No thinking about private contractors or my one and only friend.

I didn't want to think about anything anymore.

Aoii Mikoko,

classmate.



6

ABNORMAL ENDING

That Wraps It up

I'm begging you, please stop getting my hopes up.

1

"I'll be back tomorrow. Around twelve. You'll have your answer then."

That was the note I had left for Mikoko-chan on her tea table. Getting to Horikawa Oike took less than ten minutes by Vespa, so I still had an abundance of time.

I awoke at eight in the morning. I did a little jogging to kill some time, and after that I regretted it. Miiko-san invited me to breakfast, so I went to her place and was fed. It wasn't just Japanese-style food, but full-blown Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. As a result, the flavor left something to be desired, but there was certainly a lot of it, so it at least took the edge off my hunger.

"Well, I have to go to work," she said around ten o'clock, and left her apartment.

I returned to my own room to kill more time. I tried playing a game of Eight Queens, just as I had done earlier, but my brain didn't seem to be functioning properly, and I gave up by the fifth queen. I moved on to the Cannibals and Missionaries problem, but again I got sick of it midway through. If only I had owned a computer; I could have passed the time playing

video games. Maybe it was time I went and got one from Kunagisa. But then again, it didn't seem like a great idea to decrease the amount of space in my room just for the sake of having a way to kill time. Besides, time passes just the same, whether you kill it or not. And like I had said to Mikoko-chan, I didn't particularly dislike being bored, and I was plenty used to waiting.

. . .

As any child won over by shallow wit is oft to do, I read *The Little Prince* at a very young age. I didn't get it. The people around me at that time told me, "You'll get it when you're a grown-up." Recently I had recalled this and tried reading through it once again. I still didn't get it.

"Zerozaki's gone from Kyoto . . . there's no way to contact Aikawa-san . . . and Kunagisa's a shut-in."

I truly didn't have a single normal acquaintance. Of course, I never particularly wanted one. Still, sometimes it occurred to me. I was just a single, lonely guy trying to live, but rotting away in a cage instead.

"It's a hopeless situation."

In the end, there was no way for a guy like me, just a single character in this great big world, to view my situation with any kind of bird's-eye perspective. Especially when, as Aikawa-san had said, I wasn't the main character or even a supporting character, but merely the comic relief. I was just sitting off in some corner away from the world, clumsily babbling about the story.

And something this factual couldn't even be written off as self-deprecation.

"Well, I suppose I'll get going."

The time was currently eleven o'clock. It was still way early, but I doubted I could be faulted for showing up ahead of time. With that in mind, I left my apartment and made my way out to the parking lot. I started up the vintage Vespa's engine and put on the helmet. It was the stylish, half-size number Mikoko-chan had left in my room the previous day. There was nothing I could do to make it suit me, but the size was right, so it would at least uphold its role as a helmet, for what that was worth.

Blast off! I rode down Senbon Street and turned east on Maruta-machi Street. I broke east again onto Horikawa Street and rode the Vespa straight ahead from there.

The sweet sensation of slicing through the wind. I could almost forget about the fact that I was alive.

As expected, I reached Oike within ten minutes. I parked the Vespa in the apartment's underground parking lot and locked it up, exited the lot, and walked around to the front of the building.

"Did I really waste over an hour here last time?"

It was a pretty embarrassing memory. My brain had a knack for remembering only this kind of thing. I guess the best thing I could do was learn from these memories and not repeat the same mistakes.

This time I entered the building without stopping. I gave a quick greeting to the security camera and entered the elevator.

At this point.

At this point, I still hadn't thought of anything.

How to reply to her confession.

What words I could use to respond to her affection.

I hadn't thought of anything.

"Just kidding."

In reality I had made up my mind long ago. I only had one word to say to her. There was nothing to deliberate over. If you thought about the kind of person I was and the kind of person Mikoko-chan was and added them together, an answer would emerge naturally, just like a mathematic equation. Of course, reality never turns out like an equation. It's more like trying to figure out if the last digit in pi is odd or even. Meanwhile, I was standing at the height of stupidity, off in outer space with my equations and formulae and calculations, trying to find the area of a triangle by multiplying the height and dividing by two.

I was the kind of person who changed his opinion in the end anyway, no matter what he had decided, so what I thought about now was essentially irrelevant.

I got off the elevator on the fourth floor and walked down the hall.

"Room three, was it?"

My memory was fuzzy, but that sounded right. I wondered if she was awake yet. She certainly didn't seem like she was the kind of person who had low blood pressure and would have trouble waking up, but considering how bad she was at keeping time, I doubted she was much of an early riser.

I pushed the button on her intercom.

No reply.

It wasn't simply that there was no reply through the intercom; there was no *reaction* whatsoever. No noise coming from the inside. Nothing.

"How odd . . ."

I pushed the button once again.

No change.

I couldn't sense anyone moving about inside.

Restless. Restless. Restless.

My heart throbbed.

My bodily functions grew abnormal.

I continued pushing the intercom button without speaking a word.

Once, twice, three times, four times.

I quit counting after the fifth time.

I could feel it.

Not suspicion, but a premonition.

But closer still to precognition.

"It was like watching a nonstop stream of movies where you already know the ending."

Wasn't that how that prophet had described it?

Like something you could never touch on the opposite side of the boob tube.

Suddenly I understood her feelings, and I'd never even wanted to.

Aoii Mikoko.

My classmate.

Always cheerful, sometimes sad.

The girl who said

She liked me.

Here now was an image.

A scene I had left behind somewhere.

A nostalgic view.

One that had been all too close to me for some time.

That I had forgotten somewhere along the way.

One that was unnecessary to recall.

A terrible,
Detestable
View.

Death.

Nothingness.

. . . .

I mumbled a curse and opened the door to Mikoko-chan's room.

Aoii Mikoko was dead.

2

A brutal sight. A devastating sight.

I stood frozen in the center of Mikoko-chan's room. It was all I could bear to do.

I feel sick. I feel sick. I feel sick.

I feel sick. I feel sick. I feel sick.

I feel sick. I feel sick. I feel sick.

Eiffelzick.

I clutched my chest.

I was nauseous.

It was like I had accidentally choked down some absolutely undigestible object. My eyes fell on the bed. Mikoko-chan was there, lying down.

Sleeping.

Could you call it sleeping?

Even supposing her body had ceased to function.

Supposing she had no pulse.

Supposing the hideous marks left by fabric remained etched into her neck.

Supposing her eyes were never to open again.

Even then, there was no other term I cared to use.

Thump. *Thump*. *Thump*. *Thump*. *Thump*. I feel sick. I'm dizzy. I'm dizzy. I'm dizzy. It's spinning. It's spinning. This is crazy-crazycrazycrazy.

Or was it I who was crazy?

Right here, right now, I thought I might collapse.

My pulse was going wild.

It was hard to breathe.

It was hard to live.

I thought I might die.

The insides of my eyes were burning.

The inside of my heart was freezing.

I tried swallowing to calm myself, but to no avail. This was agony. Agony. Agony.

"Aoii Mikoko was . . ." I said, as if making the announcement to myself, "murdered."

Whump.

I really did collapse, right there where I stood, right on my rear end.

I was used to people dying.

I was even used to people close to me dying.

Death *was* something close to me.

And still, this was agonizing. It hurt. It hurt too much.

It was excruciating.

I would probably never be able to forget this. To forget Mikoko-chan's "death itself" burning into my retinas the instant I had entered the room. I would never forget her lifeless, mindless corpse.

Somehow I managed to maintain consciousness. I shifted my gaze back to Mikoko-chan's body once more. She lay faceup on the bed, her bloated, violet-hued face wrenched in agony. Having known what her smile was like made this all the more terrible.

She was no longer dressed in yesterday's overalls. Now she wore a snow-white bare shoulder top with a striking pants skirt of the same white, but with more of a milky quality. I stopped myself from thinking it looked like a burial outfit.

And then I remembered. This was one of the many outfits Mikoko-chan bought during yesterday's outing. It was the last one she bought. She had tried it on and said, "How do I look?"

Finally tired of giving made-up answers, I looked at her and said, "It's a good match."

It was *that* outfit.

When I had brought her home the previous night, naturally I hadn't made her change clothes. I just tossed her on the bed with what she was wearing. This must have meant that she had woken up later on and changed.

And then . . .

What had possessed her to put on this outfit? And who was she waiting for? The power of my imagination was already completely exhausted.

And then there were the red letters, right by her head.

x/y.

It was the exact same formula as the one we had found in Tomoe-chan's place.

"This has nonsense written all over it."

I pulled out my cellular phone. I entered a number from memory and sent it. She picked up on the first ring.

"Sasa here."

"Hello . . ."

"Oh, it's you," Sasaki-san said before I had a chance to announce my name. Apparently she could remember people just by their voices. And we had only spoken once. If circumstances hadn't been what they were, I would've been impressed.

"What's wrong? Did you remember something?"

She was cool and calm. This was somehow offensive. It was objectionable. Objectionable.

"Sasaki-san, um, right, well . . . Aoii-san . . ."

"What's that? I'm sorry, I can't hear you. Could you please speak up a bit? What's that about Aoii-san?"

"Well . . . she's been murdered."

Something changed on the other end of the receiver. "Where are you now?"

"In Aoii-san's apartment."

"We'll be there soon."

Click. The phone cut off as abruptly as a human life. I stood there with the phone held to my ear. Mikoko-chan remained there in front of me.

"Christ . . ." I said to her still body. It was a pointless act. It was pointless and despicable. "What was I really planning to tell you?"

Mikoko-chan.

There was no prospect of me getting rid of that nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach. Not a chance.

The police burst into the apartment in less than ten minutes.

"Are you okay?" Sasaki-san embraced me. I must have looked pretty damn miserable, because she seemed genuinely concerned for me "Are you okay?" she repeated. Unable to form a verbal answer, I simply raised an arm instead. She saw this and gave a firm nod.

"Let's get you out of her for now. Come on, hurry."

Leaning on Sasaki-san's shoulder, I was taken out of the hallway. Police were filing in one after another from the elevator. Hey, now. No Kazuhito-san. Hadn't he come? Maybe he was somewhere else, doing something else. Maybe, maybe not.

"Ughhh . . ." My chest hurts. My chest hurts. My chest hurts. "Ughhhh . . ."

I feel sick. I feel sick.

I really feel like I feel sick.

A discomfort, as if my chest were burning, like my insides were being demolished, like something was raging inside my guts, seeped into my blood and traveled throughout my whole body.

It burns it burns it burns it burns.

The anguish was maddening.

Sasaki-san took me out of the building and helped me into the rear seat of her Toyota Crown. She sat in the driver's seat.

"Have you settled down a bit?" she said, looking back at me.

I shook my head in silence.

"I see." She eyed me suspiciously. "I thought you were the kind of person who didn't mind seeing a dead body. Even if it belonged to a friend." She'd abandoned her courteous manner. "I guess you're more sensitive than I thought. You looked like you were dying back there."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take that as a compli—"

Just as I was about to get the "ment" syllable out, I felt the urge to vomit. I clamped my hand over my mouth. There was no way I could just toss my cookies in Sasaki-san's car. Somehow I managed to keep control of my internal organs. Dammit. I couldn't even mouth off.

"Hmm." Sasaki-san nodded with a slight look of disappointment. "You're awfully spineless. I'm surprised Jun-san is so fond of you."

Ah, come to think of it, hadn't Aikawa-san said something about being old friends with Sasaki-san? Recalling this completely irrelevant detail helped distract me a bit. I sat up from my hunched position and rested my weight against the back of the seat. I breathed in deep.

"Yeah, I'm surprisingly fragile. Of course, I can't tell if it's brittleness, frailty, or if I'm just delicate . . ."

"What in the world are you talking about? You're not making a lick of sense."

"Well, please wait till next time. Next time, 'kay? I'm in a very irregular state right now, so let's wait till next time before you judge what kind of human being I am. I'm not doing so hot right now."

"Guaahhh," I groaned, and shut my eyes.

Sasaki-san was silent for a moment. "From here, we're going to have to question you about the circumstances of this case. This means I've got to take you to the police station. Can you handle this?"

"As long as you drive carefully, I think I'll be all right."

"Okay. I'll try not to make the ride too bumpy."

She faced forward and began to drive. Mikoko-chan's apartment disappeared from the window view in no time at all. I couldn't make out the speedometer from where I was sitting, but judging by my body's response to the car's movement, there was no way Sasaki-san's driving style could be defined as "careful."

"Sasaki-san, is it okay for you to be away from the crime scene?"

"My job is more about intellectual labor than about that stuff."

"That sounds like, well . . ." I wanted to say it sounded like we'd get along, but I stopped myself. No matter how you looked at it, there was no way we would get along. "Um, Sasaki-san?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"How do you know Aikawa-san?"

She was silent for a moment—though it was plenty easy to imagine the look on her face—and then said, "Sometimes I go to her for help with work. Yeah, that's all. Do you ever watch detective TV shows and the like?"

"I know a thing or two about them."

"Yes, well, you know how oftentimes the detective goes to an informant to gather information that isn't quite legal? Well, it's like that. We have a businesslike relationship."

It was an awfully crude explanation. Or rather, she didn't seem to want to explain it at all. Then again, Aikawa was a pretty inexplicable woman, so maybe there wasn't much of a choice.

"No, I don't mean something that specific," I said. "Can you give me something more abstract? I mean, what kind of person is she to you?"

"Do we absolutely have to talk about this right now?"

"It might take my mind off things." I really meant this. If I didn't get something to distract me quick, my stomach was going to burst. "Please, I'm begging you. Just talk about something."

"You pose a difficult question, you know," she said, after awhile. "For example, would you believe a story about a person who took a point-blank shot to the gut from a sawed-off shotgun and survived? How about the one about someone who can walk around in the midst of a storm of rifle fire with a normal, straight face? How about someone who leaped from the fortieth floor of a burning building a walked away without a scratch? You wouldn't believe it, would you? Whenever I talk about Jun-san, people think I'm lying. So it's a tough subject to discuss."

". . ."

I understood exactly how she felt, so I didn't dare press any further.

In another ten minutes, we had arrived at the police station. She took me inside the building.

"Looks like it's exactly twelve o'clock—lunchtime. Would you like something to eat?" she asked.

"Could we get *katsu-don* or something like that?"

"I don't see why not. They'll bill you for it later, though."

The government was anal.

"Eh, never mind," I said, shaking my head. If I tried to eat anything now, I would just throw it up anyway. That I could say with a fair degree of certainty.

"Hmm, well, then go on into that room and wait for me. I've just go to make a quick report. I'll be back in two minutes."

She led me into a small conference room and made her way back down the hall alone. Well, at least it wasn't an interrogation room, I thought as I sunk myself into a chair.

I want to smoke, I thought for an instant.

I had never smoked a cigarette in my life.

Was I bored?

Was I trying to escape reality?

Or was I just suicidal?

Any one of those was of equal worth, if you asked me.

These were pointless thoughts.

This was starting to get pretty bad.

One more push, and this existence known as "me," this state of being known as "myself," was going to be over.

"Sorry for the wait," Sasaki-san said upon returning. She was carrying some sort of item wrapped in pink. "Are you okay? You're looking worse and worse by the second. Even your hands are sweating."

"I'm sorry, could you show me where the bathroom is?"

"Down that hall, on the right. It's at the very end, so I don't think you'll miss it."

"Thanks," I said, and raced out of the room, clamping a hand back over my mouth. Suppressing the nausea.

I found the bathroom right where she had said it would be, entered one of the stalls, and vomited everything that had built up in my stomach.

"Gwaaahhh . . . glllaaahhh . . ." Unpleasant noises that sounded very unlike they were coming from myself spilled from the depths of my throat.

An acid taste remained in my mouth. I had vomited so profusely I thought my guts might have flipped upside down. Slowly, I drew in a deep breath and rose to my feet, wiping my mouth with a handkerchief.

I flushed the toilet.

Phew . . .

I made my way over to the sink and washed my face. I scooped some water into my hands and rinsed out my mouth as well. I looked into my own reflection in the mirror. Okay, so I did look like I was at death's door, but at least I was feeling decidedly better than I had even moments ago.

"Okay," I said.

Revitalized, I muttered as I left the bathroom behind. I made my way back to the room, where Sasaki-san was still waiting for me. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm okay. I puked, and now I feel a lot better."

"I see. Here," she said, placing the packaged item from before in front of me. "It's my lunch. Want it?"

"Is it okay?"

"I won't bill you for it, don't worry." She chose a chair and sat down across from me. I graciously accepted her lunch. It was a fairly generic bento lunch, but my stomach was now empty. I scarfed it down pretty fast.

"Okay, then," she said once I was finished. "So what's going on here?"

"That's what I want to know."

". . ."

Seemingly a bit offended by my phrasing, she grew silent and gave me the death stare. I recoiled and diverted my gaze. "Well, then please give me the facts, in simple terms."

"Er, to do that, I'll have to back up to last night, so it'll be a little long."

"Go right ahead. Until we solve this case, you and I will be spending a lot of time together." She was smiling a little. Her eyes, however, weren't smiling, which was frightening. I decided to quit with the mouthing off for a while and be straight with her.

"Yesterday, Aoii-san and I went out. We were in the Shinkyôgoku area. Then, well, she drank a little too much."

"Oh, really? . . . And then?"

She sharpened her gaze on me as if she had been waiting for this opening. Surely she wasn't going to get on my case about underage drinking. I realized I couldn't let my guard down.

"Yeah, so then I took her back to her apartment. I went ahead and took the key out of her bag and put her to bed. Then I took the bus back to my place." I went ahead and skipped the part about running into Aikawa-san, figuring it wasn't necessary to recount. "After that, I just went to bed like I always do."

"Did you lock up before you left?"

"I did. Her Vespa was still parked in my apartment parking lot, so I was planning to bring the key and Vespa back together tomo—today. So then today, I went to her place on the Vespa. When I opened the door and went inside, well, things were as you saw them."

"Hmm . . . how about the door? Was it locked?"

"Huh?"

I looked up at her as if the question had taken me by surprise. I made an expression as though I were searching through my memory for as long as five seconds.

"No, it wasn't locked. I don't have any recollection of using the key."

"I see." She wore a suspicious look on her face, but nodded along anyway.

"That place has a lot of surveillance cameras, right. I think they should be able to corroborate my story if you take a look at those tapes."

"Most likely. We've already arranged with the management firm for a viewing," she said coolly. "Now, this is just to make sure, but—you didn't touch anything at the crime scene, did you?"

"No. As pathetic as it sounds, I was just too petrified. I couldn't even run over to Aoii-san."

"You took a very appropriate action," she said. From there, she shut her eyes and thought to herself.

So "intellectual labor" was her major job responsibility. That was already more than clear enough from the time she had visited my apartment. That chess-game mindset of hers was unforgettable, even if you wanted to forget it.

"I didn't even touch Aoii-san's body, so I don't know, but was she really dead?"

"Yes. That I can confirm. She had likely been dead for around two to three hours. We'll have to wait for the autopsy results before we can confirm the specific details, but the incident is believed to have occurred between nine and ten a.m."

"This may be useless to you, but . . ."

"Go right ahead. Nothing in this world is useless."

That was a line I thought I might like to try saying once myself. But I doubted a guy like me would ever have the chance.

"When I put her to bed last night, Aoii-san was wearing overalls. But that wasn't what she had on today, was it? So I think that means she woke up at some point, either in the morning or the middle of the night. And I locked the door last night, so maybe Aoii-san let the killer in herself."

"I see . . ."

"Oh, and just for your information, that outfit she had on today was something she bought yesterday when we were out shopping."

"Really." Sasaki-san nodded. I noticed that she hadn't been taking any notes. Come to think of it, that was true during the time she visited my apartment as well. She was just listening to me talk without recording anything.

"You've got a pretty great memory, huh?"

"Sorry? Oh, well, it does the job," she replied as if it was nothing special. But to me it was an extremely enviable trait.

"Also, as it happens, I was eating breakfast at my next-door neighbor's place during that nine o'clock to ten o'clock time frame, so I think I have an alibi, for what it's worth."

"Ah, I see," she nodded with an apparent lack of interest. It was as if to say she had more important things to think about than my damn alibi.

"You know, when you first called, I thought you were probably the killer."

". . ."

This sudden declaration left me speechless. "You certainly are direct. Excuse me if I'm a little surprised."

"Yes, well, you would be. But it's true. The fact is that I did think that, and I'm certainly not trying to hide the facts. I thought you killed her and then tried to pretend you had discovered the body. But it seemed you were feeling genuinely ill, and time of death and such aside, there was no murder weapon at the scene of the crime. Which means it would have been physically impossible for you to have done it."

". . ."

"That is, of course, unless you're hiding it somewhere in your clothes right now."

"Care to check?"

"No, that's fine," she said, but by no means could this be considered negligence of duty. Sasaki-san had already finished checking me out back when she took me out of Mikoko-chan's apartment. Unable to walk on my own, she had lent me a shoulder to lean on. It was kindness—injected with a touch of shrewdness.

I didn't particularly have a problem with that.

"Gee, thanks," I said.

"I'm sure your innocence will be proven beyond any doubt once an official time of death has been established and we take a look at those surveillance tapes. But only then."

She looked me directly in the eye.

"Who do you suppose did it?" Sasaki-san asked. I'd already asked her the same question twice before on other occasions.

"Well . . . I don't know."

"Nobody comes to mind at all?"

"Nobody," I answered promptly. "I mean, Aoii-san and I weren't really all that close to begin with. It was only very

recently that we had started hanging out together and going out to eat and stuff."

"Allow me to be a bit direct," she said. "Were you and Aoii-san romantically involved?"

"The answer to that is a no. A no and nothing more. Thinking about it now, I'm not even sure we were even friends."

"Ahh, I see. Come to think of it, Jun-san did say you were 'like that,' didn't she?" she muttered, seemingly satisfied with whatever explanation she had recalled.

"Aikawa-san? She said what about me?"

"Well, I can't tell you that." This tease of a statement was sure to bother me, but it occurred to me that this too could be part of Sasaki-san's strategy, so I was careful not to press any further. It was easy enough to imagine the kind of judgment Aikawa-san had passed in regard to me anyway.

From there, Sasaki-san posed several more detailed questions and ended with a simple, "I see."

"Now then, do you have any questions for me?" she added.

"No, nothing this time," I said after a moment's thought. "I'd rather just get home and rest as soon as possible."

"I see. Well, that should be enough for today. Allow me to take you back."

She stood up from her chair and exited the room. I followed close behind, and together we exited the building. After getting into her Crown, I sat in the same seat in the back. Sasaki started the car and accelerated even more aggressively than before.

"Nakadachiuri, was it? Off Senbon?"

"Yeah."

"How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Throwing up was surprisingly refreshing."

"You know," she said while driving. Her voice was stripped of all emotion. "I can't help but feel like you're still hiding something."

"Hiding? Me?"

"That's what I said."

"No, nothing in particular. As you can see, I'm just an honest, harmless, and well-behaved young man."

"Wow, really?" she said in a rare display of sarcasm. "You sure don't look that way to me, but I guess if you say so yourself, it must be true."

"You sound like you mean something by that."

"No, not especially. If it sounds that way to you, it's probably because you've got a guilty conscience. Although I do doubt that an honest, well-behaved young man would go around breaking into crime scenes illegally."

"Oh."

Open bag, withdraw cat.

Naturally, I'd been prepared for this risk from the very beginning, but Sasaki-san had certainly caught me off guard. There hadn't been a single word about this in those documents from Kunagisa, so it had never been clear if I had been found out or not.

She continued staring straight ahead at the road as she spoke. "At any rate, please just relax," she said as if she could see right through me. "That information hasn't gone beyond me yet."

"You?"

"That's what I said." Her voice lacked intonation. And yet there was a meanness to it. Yeah, somehow it was very reminiscent of mankind's greatest private contractor.

"I don't know what possessed you to break into Emoto-san's room, but I suggest you exercise a bit more discretion in your actions. Consider this a piece of advice."

"Not a warning?"

"No, no, just advice."

But there was something very offensive about her wording. Granted, my actions had been totally rash, and her attitude was entirely justified, but still.

"Sasaki-san, I'm just asking, but . . . why hasn't that information gone beyond you 'yet'?"

"Well, I have my ways. I won't go into detail, but I just want you to realize that I have that advantage over you. That's all. But please be sure not to forget it."

All I could do was sigh. My shoulders slumped and the energy drained out of my body. This damn pattern again? Why were these the only kinds of people I ever met?

"Everybody I know is either extremely smart or has a terrible personality. They all had that same damn character. Just once I'd like to meet somebody who's nice. I don't even care if they're stupid."

"Well," Sasaki-san said without even cracking a smirk. "I'm sorry to hear that. But I have no intention of forfeiting my position."

And we arrived at the Senbon Nakadachiuri intersection.

"Would you like to come inside?" I asked.

"I'm working," she said. I didn't find this particularly unfortunate, nor did I think the opposite.

As a final thought, she opened her window. "What do you suppose *x* over *y* means?" she asked.

"Search me," I said after a moment's contemplation. I knew she'd never be satisfied with this answer. But she simply nodded, closed the window, and took off in her car once again.

I stood there awhile, unmoving, then felt the sheer pointlessness of my inaction. I returned to the building, walked down the second-floor hall, and entered my room.

This quiet space.

Not a single sound.

Not a single person.

A room Aoii Mikoko had twice visited.

Once I had set out *yatsuhashi*; once she had come with handmade sweet potatoes.

I wasn't much for sentimentality. I was no pessimist, either. Nor was I a romanticist. Rather, I was a misguided trivialist.

"I guess I can't say this was a complete surprise," I muttered. "I won't say that. No, no I won't."

I recalled my conversation with Mikoko-chan from the previous day. A conversation we would never have again.

"It was all nonsense, huh?"

Let us hypothesize as to Mikoko-chan's feelings towards her killer. She probably wasn't resentful. Accusing, maybe, but that's it. That was the kind of girl I took her for.

There must have been something.

Something I should have said to her.

What was I really supposed to say to her yesterday?

"This is like crying over spilt milk," I said to myself.

My terribly lukewarm soliloquy. I realized that this was probably the kind of situation that usually makes people cry. The person over my shoulder sure thought so.

Night fell.

Miiko-san visited my room looking concerned. "Eat this," she said, thrusting a bowl of rice porridge at me. She wore an innocent expression, but her eyes were serious. Knowing her gesture had come straight from the heart, I started to feel guilty.

Christ. Just how many people had I caused extra grief by now?

"Thanks a lot." I scooped some up with the spoon Miiko-san had provided (there were only disposable chopsticks in my place), and helped myself to a mouthful. She wasn't an especially good cook, but this porridge was pretty tasty.

"Did something happen?" Miiko-san *didn't* ask. She never asked that type of question. She was just the neighbor who silently and protectively watched over me. A neighbor in the truest sense. This was probably something entirely different from true kindness, but she was a kind person all the same.

Come to think of it, hadn't Mikoko-chan given me the same compliment? That I was kind?

"Mikoko-chan . . . she died," I said without any introduction.

"I see," Miiko-san nodded. She sounded like she didn't particularly think much of it. "That night," she said, "by which I mean the night when the young girl stayed in my room, she was strangely grouchy when she woke up the next morning. At first I thought it was probably due to a hangover, but that didn't seem to be it."

. . . .

"I asked her, 'How do you feel?' She answered, 'this is the worst morning of my life.' . . . That's the whole story."

"That's plenty," I said. "Thanks so much, Miiko-san."

"You really do lead a difficult life, don't you? The road you walk is not steep, but it is shaky and brittle. And yet you're able to go on without slipping. You have my honest admiration."

"I slipped and fell through the cracks long ago. But this path has a sort of strange gravitational pull, and I'm clinging to the bottom of it now."

"Whatever the case may be, you're entering a crucial phase now," she said, her voice deepening a bit. It almost sounded like a threat. "If you lose your grip now, you'll never make it. Everything you've endured and built up and worked for will spill right down the drain. You probably don't care either way, but just remember that your life isn't something you made all by yourself. Don't forget that there are those you have saved just by being alive."

"There are no such people." Perhaps there was too much self-loathing in my statement. Possibly as a result, Miiko-san gave me a pitying glance.

"You carry too much of a burden," she said. "Don't think you can really affect people so much. Only the weak turn red when they cross paths with scarlet. As long as you can exercise their own judgment, you're less easily influenced by others. Your existence isn't such an annoyance to others."

"Mmm, maybe not."

It was just extreme self-consciousness in the end.

Whether I was alive or not made no difference.

Even if there were a murderer in my midst, the world would go on.

"Still, I'm sure there are those who love you. There are those who have unconditional affection for you, that much is certain. That's part of the world's cycle. You may not under-

stand it now, but remember what I say. There will come a time when you understand. At least stay alive that long."

Those with unconditional affection for me.

Today, one of them had died.

So then how many people were left?

"I won't tell you to cheer up. That's a problem for you to sort out on your own. Just know that that young girl's death wasn't your fault. I can guarantee you that. I don't have any basis for my belief, but I feel sure of it all the same . . . Those who die just die."

"But . . . it's like I killed her," I said.

"Did you?"

"Well, no, but if . . ."

If.

If I hadn't left her alone in her apartment, if I hadn't gone home, or if I had just brought her with me, things would have turned out differently.

"And I say you're taking on too much of a burden. Do you realize the pointlessness of such thoughts?"

"Yes. But Miiko-san, I still had something left to tell her."

That one last thing.

I hadn't yet told her that one last thing.

"It's useless to regret what's done and gone. That's all I can say." Her gaze wandered just a bit. "Also, I forgot to tell you this morning. Suzunashi sends a message. She told me to make sure I told you."

"It's from Suzunashi-san?"

She nodded. I sat up straight. It wasn't like Suzunashi-san was in the room or anything, so I knew there was no need to do so, but something about that name just made me reflex-

ively fix my posture. Something about that Suzunashi Neon character.

Miiko-san opened her mouth. "There are two types of people—those who are frightening because you don't know what they'll do, and those who are frightening because you *do* know what they'll do. But you're not very frightening at all, so you don't need to worry about such things."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Make sure you do. She said she'll come visit from Hiei next time, so let's all go out for lunch. I think she wants to give you a good lecture."

"Well, you had me up to the lecture. But I'm definitely okay with lunch. Just . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Oh, nothing. Thanks a lot for the food."

I returned the porridge bowl to her. She took it, said good night and left my room. The word *Impermanence* was written on the back of her *jinbei*. It was the second time I had seen this one.

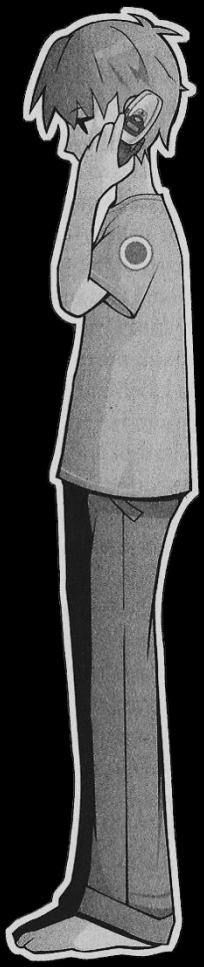
"Seriously . . ." I mumbled to myself. This was a troublesome existence. Maybe it was about time I had a day-long lecture from Suzunashi-san.

But.

"But I really don't want to go to that restaurant again for a while . . ."

When would this mind-over-matter business be over?

I didn't know.



Me, narrator.

7

SINK AND DIE

Cynicism

Kill every suspect, starting at one end.
The one left standing is your culprit.

1

Three days later, it was Wednesday, May twenty-fifth. I awoke at eleven fifty in the morning.

"I guess it'd be cheating to say it's still morning, huh?"

I rose from bed feeling fairly awful. Lately it had been like this every day. I couldn't wake up at a normal time at all anymore. I guess you could say my body had been rejecting the idea. Naturally, once I had overslept, I couldn't get into the mood to attend classes, and if I wasn't in the mood to attend classes, there was no reason to.

And thus began my fifth straight day of skipping school since Thursday of last week. For a freshman to already be doing this in May, it wouldn't be strange if I ended up having to repeat my freshman year. I realized this, but I wasn't particularly opposed to the idea. There was no one to object—I was paying for my schooling with my own money, after all.

. . .

Since the recent incident, Sasaki-san had come to visit on both Monday and Tuesday with Kazuhito-san in tow. She made a number of detailed inquiries regarding Mikoko-chan's

murder, and in exchange for my answers, provided several tidbits of seemingly vital information.

She informed me that Mikoko-chan's time of death had been narrowed down to between nine thirty and ten o'clock. They had also confirmed beyond a doubt that she had been killed by strangulation with a thin cloth, and that it was the same type of cloth that had been used in Tomo-chan's murder. From this the police had determined that the same killer was responsible for both murders.

"What's different from Emoto-san's case is that Aoii-san appears to have been strangled from the front."

"From the front?"

"Yes. Emoto-san was strangled from behind. You can tell by the shape of the marks."

"In other words, Mikoko-chan saw the killer?"

"It's possible," she said, without emotion. It probably didn't make any difference to her whether the deceased had seen the killer's face or not. It was certainly a rational viewpoint.

She also went over the alibis of the various involved parties. Muimi-chan was out sightseeing with her younger sister (named Muri-chan, as it were). Akiharu-kun didn't have an alibi. And of course, I was with Miiko-san. But all three of us had alibis when Tomo-chan was killed, so none of us were really prime suspects, so to speak.

"I personally don't agree, but it seems the big shots upstairs are considering the possibility that these were just robberies gone awry, or possibly some stalker who went too far."

"If either of those were the case, there wouldn't have been multiple incidents. It's too strange to be a coincidence, and

besides, nothing was even stolen, right? There weren't any signs of a struggle, either."

"I know. It's just that neither of them had the 'enemies' to account for it being a simple vendetta case. I guess it would be one thing if it was some 'enemy of the world' kind of thing—but then we'd have another indiscriminant killer like the prowler."

Speaking of which, the slasher case had come to a standstill. The number of victims had yet to exceed twelve. In other words, since encountering Aikawa-san, Zerozaki hadn't had taken any fresh victims. He probably wasn't in Kyoto anymore after all, just like Aikawa-san and I had talked about. I wasn't even sure he was still in Japan. Then again, if I had made an enemy of Aikawa-san, I probably would've fled to the South Pole. Or outer space, even.

"Still, there's something strange going on," Sasaki-san said.

"Strange? What?"

"The surveillance camera. That apartment had surveillance cameras set up as a crime-preventing measure. You said so yourself last time."

"Right."

"But on the camera videos, there wasn't a single person who seemed like a possible suspect."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. We checked all the tapes from the time Aoii-san returned home—or rather, when you carried her home—at ten thirty, but the only people to appear were other residents of the building and you, from when you showed up the next afternoon."

What did that mean? Was the entire apartment building, in essence, a locked room? What a joke. It was too unrealistic. But then again, if it *was* a fact, such criticism was meaningless.

"But the camera in the hallway must have a blind spot somewhere," I said.

"Yes. We tried it out. It is possible to reach Aoii-san's room without entering the camera's field of view. The stem of the camera kind of swivels like this, see. But it's nearly impossible without having practiced it beforehand quite a bit, and even then, your chances of success would be relatively low. Why would a person go to all the trouble?"

"Well, what if they didn't? What if they came in from the veranda or something?"

"Not possible. It's simply too high and too risky. At any rate . . ." She let out an exhausted sigh that didn't seem very characteristic of her. "I think this is going to turn into a war of attrition," she said.

She was probably already in the middle of one.

"A war of attrition . . ."

But no matter how much new information she was willing to divulge, I had already stopped thinking about this string of incidents. Of course I wasn't at such an elevated level of enlightenment that I didn't even have split-second thoughts about it anymore, but I had been at least half-successful in suppressing that part of me.

On the contrary.

On the contrary, I was hoping the truth behind the incidents would never come to light. I didn't want to have anything more to do with it, in any form whatsoever.

But that was impossible. Sasa Sasaki-san was a detective of immeasurable brilliance. This had become evident through my

several conversations with her up to now. It was clear how she and Aikawa-san could be friends. It wouldn't be long before Aikawa-san uncovered the truth. Maybe she wouldn't figure out every little detail, but enough to form a consistent story.

And thus there was no need for me to do any more thinking. Or to put it more plainly, I could already see most of the facts. One more step and I would have the whole picture figured out, and that was one step I didn't want to take. Nor did I feel much like condemning criminals. I had gone as far as breaking into Tomo-chan's room and enlisting Kunagisa's help, and here I was ready to throw in the towel, to leave things as unfinished as a baboon without a butt.

But frankly, that's just who I am. Half-baked all the way. I've never put up a struggle. I've never shown any enthusiasm for anything.

"Okay . . ." I stretched out my torso, took a deep breath, and switched channels in my brain. "Maybe I ought to pay Tomo a visit for a change."

As a complete shut-in, it was essentially guaranteed that she would be home, so I knew it wouldn't be a waste of time to just head there now. She might have been asleep, seeing as it was the afternoon, but I didn't care. It would serve as a good chance to give her a stern talking-to for selling me out to Aikawa-san.

Besides, being with her was sure to cheer me up.

With that decision made, I changed clothes and stuck my cell phone into my pocket. I debated with myself for a while over whether I should borrow Miiko-san's Fiat, walk, or ride my bike, but ultimately I decided on walking. It just felt like a good day for walking. Of course, that would take a good three hours, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

I left my room, locked up, and exited the building.

It was nice out. It had been muggy lately, but that day it was pleasantly dry and crisp. I thought about how nice it would be if the weather was always like this, but even I wasn't sure that I exactly meant "always."

"Huh?"

After walking for a bit, I spotted someone familiar. I couldn't remember who, but it was definitely someone familiar. Just who was it? It felt like we had met before, but . . .

He was a dressed in street fashion with light brown hair and the face of a playboy. He was toting an abnormally large bag that left a strong impression, but it was a poor match for his street fashion.

I've always wondered why street fashion looked so bad on Japanese people. It wasn't so much that it didn't suit them; it was just that it always made them look like they were posing. I suppose you could call it a national trait.

That aside, who in the world was this?

Upon noticing me, he ran over to me. "Yo!" he said casually.

"Hello," I replied, but of course I still couldn't remember him. I knew he was a Rokumeikan University student, but I didn't remember knowing anyone like this.

"How ya been? Maaan, I don't know this place too well. You know, the geography 'n shit. I'm totally lost."

"Ahhhh . . . yeah," I improvised. "Yeah, those things sure happen."

"Start coming to school again, man. I had to come all the way out here. I mean I know you're shocked about the whole Aoii thing, but man, you're gonna end up having to repeat a year. People will call you 'Double Dragon' 'n shit."

Aoii? Did he just mention Aoii?

Oh, right. Got it.

"Akiharu-kun, right?"

"Whoa. What the hell, man? Don't tell me you just figured that out."

Akiharu-kun had a boisterous, lighthearted laugh. I felt as though he could see right through me and just the thought of it had me in a cold sweat.

"You mean you came to see me?"

"That's what I mean. Just some minor business. Come on, follow me."

He started walking. His explanation was not very convincing, but I went ahead and followed after him as told. There I was, just going along with the flow again.

"Where're we going?"

"Kitanotenman Shrine. It's parked there."

"What's parked there?"

"That's the surprise," he said with a smile that didn't quite sit right with me. "Man, I knew you were a gloomy guy, but your face right now is like a full-fledged gloomathon."

"You, on the other hand, seem cheerful."

"Well, you know. It's like, there was the Emoto thing, right? It's like that toughened me up. Maybe I'm still not over the shock. Man, life sure likes to just peace out on ya, huh?"

It was an awfully casual way to put it, but I got the feeling he was trying to laugh something off. What was it? I pondered this for a moment, but came up empty-handed.

"Akiharu-kun, didn't Gen. Ed. class just start? Should you really be here just messing around like this?"

"Ah, whatever. I don't care about school anymore," he laughed. "I just want to get this favor out of the way so I can

relax again. Let the dead rest, y'know? Besides, I hate that Inosen guy, so I'm not really a big fan of Gen. Ed."

That was short for Inokawa-sensei, by the way.

"Really? I think he's a pretty good guy."

"Well, I think there's a difference between good and self-righteous. It's not just the time thing, either. That guy's always trying to force his beliefs on other people, am I right? It's that kind of thing, man. I don't like it. I mean I guess he's not a hypocrite or anything, but . . . eh, something like that."

"Huh."

"Besides, I'm not gonna lose any credits just for skipping class a couple times. Our school is easy-peasy, man. They say it's famous for letting you pass classes blindfolded. Number two in all of Kansai."

Where the hell is number one? I started to ask, but I cut myself off. The less I knew about that, the better.

We arrived at Kitanotenman Shrine within five minutes. Despite its being a national treasure, something about its proximity to home made it a lot harder to appreciate, and this was actually the first time I had ever set foot on the premises.

"This way, this way," Akiharu-kun said, bringing me to the parking lot. "Here ya go, man."

He pointed proudly to a white Vespa. It was a vintage model. I took a glance at the plate and saw that this was, in fact, the very Vespa that had belonged to Mikoko-chan, that I had ridden to her house on that day.

. . . .

"Oh yeah, and this." He handed me the key as I stood there, flabbergasted. He pulled the helmet out of his bag and gave that to me as well. I had thought it was a suspiciously

large bag, but who would've guessed there was a helmet inside?

"Akiharu-kun, this . . ."

"What do you call it again? Distribution of possessions? That's all this is."

"You mean . . . I can keep this Vespa?"

"Yup. You like it, right?" he said casually. He sat down backward on the Vespa seat. He let out a boyish giggle. "Aoii was saying the Vespa was the only thing that tripped your alarm."

"Hey, that's not true . . . but is it really okay? I mean, these things are pretty valuable. Shouldn't we give it to her family or someone?"

"We got permission. Don't worry."

"But, I mean, it's only me. We just met."

"I'm tellin' you, it's fine. This was Aoii's will. Her *actual* will, I mean. Funny how the two words sound the same," he said contemplatively. "Anyway, that's what it comes down to."

"What do you mean, her 'will'?"

"Oh, that's to say, awhile back—last week, maybe—she said it. If something happened to her, if she was killed like Emoto, I should give her Vespa to Ikkun. She's terrible, man. I wanted this thing too. I told her that, and you know what she said? 'Hell no. Go die. Worse yet, go live.' What the hell is that, man? We'd been friends since high school."

"If something happened to her?" Something? If *what* happened to her? "What does that mean?"

"Well, I don't know. Aoii was Aoii, man. She must've been thinking about stuff, what with Emoto getting killed and all. But I bet she didn't really think she would be next, that's for sure."

No . . . you're wrong.

It has a deeper meaning than that.

You really haven't noticed?

"Anyway, just take it. Think of it as a present from her."

"Yeah, I guess."

I played with the key in the palm of my hand, then stuffed it into my pocket.

"Get your own insurance. I don't really know much about applying. Ahhhhh . . ." Still straddling the Vespa, he stretched his arms up toward the sky. He gave himself a good stretch, then slouched weakly into the seat. "Things have gotten crazy."

"Yeah." I absolutely concurred. "How's Muimi-chan doing?"

"Ohhh, her. She's awful, man. This might be a bad way to put it, but . . . honestly, I couldn't bear to see her," he said, casting his glance away from me.

Perhaps he was thinking of Muimi-chan, perhaps not. Either way, these words had revealed that underneath his light-hearted, casual demeanor lay true compassion toward others.

Interesting; so he was that kind of guy. Such a decent human being that he couldn't even acknowledge it himself. Believing he wasn't anything special, he hid his true values under the façade of a bad boy. He was a sheep in wolf's clothing.

The complete opposite of a wolf in sheep's clothing—like me.

"After it happened—Aoii's death, I mean—I went over there once. To Atemiya's place. It's in the middle of Senbontera-no-uchi. Anyway, she was even more depressed than Aoii was when Emoto died. Eh, but what can you ex-

pect? Those two were buds from way back in the day. I mean, they grew up together."

"She was that bad?"

"Dude, you should've seen the way she looked at me. *Me*, man. I mean, come on. Where does she come off glaring at me like that? And she's not eating. Probably not sleeping, either. If we just leave her be, I think she'll die. I want to do something for her, but . . . it's like, what can a guy like me possibly say? I only knew Aoii since high school. We were never that deep." Meanwhile, I had only known her for a short time in college. Even if that hadn't been the case, I had no words for Muimi-chan. "She's gonna end up massacring whoever did this."

"Muimi-chan?"

"Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't put it past her. That's how friends are, right?"

"But she'd still be committing a crime, even if her victim was a murderer."

"Well, sure. You're right about that. But don't these things happen? Like, aren't there moments where you just toss all the laws of society and common sense to the wind?"

"Toss them . . ."

"Yeah. I mean they really are just moments, like a flash. Then you come back to your senses. But it's never pretty. Hmm, but that kind of thing never happens to a guy like you, huh?" he said with a strange amount of confidence.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you already look like you throw everything to the wind all the time," he chuckled, pointing a finger at me. "Heh, but I'm just stealing Aoii's lines. Say, would it bother you if I talked about Aoii?"

"Not especially."

"In that case, gather 'round, buddy. I feel like talking about her," he said. "Apparently she was pretty sure from the first time she ever saw you. 'I'll probably fall for that guy,' she said. . . . You already knew she had a thing for you, right?"

"You could say that."

"To be honest, I didn't really get it at the time. It's weird saying this as a friend of hers, but she was a pretty desirable girl. I don't just mean she was hot. That has nothing to do with a girl being desirable. A pretty girl is just a pretty girl."

"Do you not like pretty girls?"

"I hate 'em. They always look like they're up to something."

That didn't seem like it was the pretty girls' fault to me, but I didn't bother interrupting.

"But with her, well . . . even if she was up to something, she would always spill her guts about it. She let all of her emotions show. There was no front and back to her. She was more like double-sided tape."

I didn't really follow his analogy.

"I've never met anyone in my whole life who had their insides as exposed as much as she did, and that includes back in grade school. I thought she must be an idiot or something at first. Anybody would, seeing someone like that, right? You think, 'Aw, man, what's *wrong* with this chick?!' "

"I concur."

"Yeah, but she was no fool. She wasn't a ditz either. It wasn't even that she was emotionally immature or that she had a low IQ or anything like that. She was actually pretty sharp and clever, in her own way."

"I agree with that, too."

"As soon as I realized all this, I got jealous, to be honest. I mean, I can't do that. It sounds simple enough just to be able to cry when you want to cry, laugh when you want to laugh, but guys like us, we can't do it. We act tough or apply strange logic to everything. Basically we're all warped. That's why Aoii was so lucky; she could get pissed off if something bad happened. She could enjoy herself to her heart's delight if something good happened. But I couldn't even acknowledge my own envy. It just turned into anger."

"Isn't there a class on that kind of thing?"

"Yeah. Educational something-or-other theory. I'm taking it too. What did they say again? Modem youth lacks a sufficient vocabulary? I think that's pretty true. We don't have enough words to express ourselves, so we don't even know what we're getting mad at. Even when we're really just sad, we say we're pissed off. But Aoii was different. She expressed exactly what she felt."

"You've sure got a lot of good things to say about her," I said as passively as possible. "Akiharu-kun, didn't you ever consider going out with her?"

He gave a bashful chuckle, but his expression was otherwise unreadable. "Well, I'm a guy, too, after all, so I won't say I never had feelings like that. Especially since I was still a virile high school student when we met. And I didn't believe in boy-girl friendships back then."

"Ah yeah, I've heard of guys like that."

But I also didn't really believe that same-gender friendships were possible either.

"But it wasn't really like that with her, actually. This goes for Atemiya and Emoto too, but it's like, you look at them

and they're definitely easy on the eyes, but it's like . . . you just don't feel the fire, or like, you *wither*."

" 'Withering' is a good way to put it. I can't say I don't follow you on that."

"Right? So that's how it was with her. Anyway, she was a nice girl. Emoto too, but she always had this sort of distance about her. Not that it was her fault, but still."

". . ."

"Well, anyway. I liked Aoii, romantic feelings aside. It wasn't like I was going out of my way trying to make her happy, but I didn't want to see her unhappy. I wouldn't let it happen. So when she fell for someone, I had to help out, y'know?"

"Huh."

"You're that 'someone,' man."

"Yeah, I know. She told me herself."

"Oh," he nodded. "Listen, I don't know if I should be saying this . . ."

"You don't have to say anything you don't want."

"No, I should. It's just that at first, I was opposed to it. Not just me—Atemiya and Emoto, too. Especially Emoto. She was unusually upset about it, saying stuff like 'anyone but him.' She even threatened to cut off Mikoko-chan if she pursued you."

"So you guys didn't like me."

"You're not surprised?"

"I'm used to not being liked. On the contrary, it's being liked that's weird for me."

"Oh. But we didn't actually dislike you. We had barely even talked to you. But the thing is—I still feel this way now,

even knowing you're a good guy, but thing is, there's just something freaky about you."

". . ."

"Like you could easily kill a person."

"Hey now, let's not go nuts," I said.

"Don't get me wrong, man, I'm not saying you *did* kill someone, but it's like you *could* kill someone, and you're just suppressing it all the time with a completely straight face. What you've got built up in your belly would take ten regular people like me to choke down. It's like you're just pretending to be human."

"Geez."

I responded as coolly as possible, but on the inside I was whistling. If I had the coordination, I would've applauded and praised him as well. Being so thoroughly figured out in less than a month's time was an entirely fresh experience for me. It was no wonder he and Tomo-chan were friends.

"But Aoii was really stubborn about the whole thing. She had no intention of giving up on you, so we gave in. But we told her to let us make a test. You know, to see if this Ikkun character was really right for her."

"Is that what that birthday party was all about?"

"You guessed it. I mean it really was Emoto's birthday and all, but still." He let out an exaggerated groan and hunched forward. "But the story just cuts off when someone dies. That goes for Emoto and Aoii both."

"Akiharu-kun," I said, deliberately cutting the intonation out of my voice. "Who do you think killed Mikoko-chan?"

"Like I would know. I don't even *want* to know. If I find out, I'll end up hating, *despising* whoever it was. But I don't

like hating people and holding grudges and stuff. It totally sucks, man, I mean, am I right?"

"Huh." I chewed on his words in my head for awhile and nodded slowly. "Yeah, you're right."

Interesting. So Akiharu-kun was living on his own terms. What about me? What terms should I have been applying to life?

I felt somebody's eyes on me and turned around. The only people there were tourists and a group of students on a field trip.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Akiharu-kun asked.

"Oh, nothing. It felt like someone was watching me."

"Hmm. Probably just your imagination."

"Yeah, maybe. But lately I've been getting that feeling once in awhile when I leave my apartment."

"Maybe it's Aoii's ghost or something."

"Yeah, could be. Yeah. Maybe."

He was probably only joking, but to me, there was truth to his words.

"Hup," he groaned as he jumped down off the Vespa. "Well, that's enough chitchat for today. Anyway, it's in your hands.'

"Yeah, I'll take care of it."

"Be sure you do. It's Aoii's memento."

"Yeah. I'll call it the Mikoko."

"Ahh," Akiharu-kun groaned, "I think you'd better not," he said. "You shouldn't attach names to vehicles. It's just needless sentimentality."

"If it's a memento, it'll be sentimental either way."

"Ah, gotcha." He nodded. "But don't call it the Mikoko." He stretched out one more time. "Ahhh. Well, I've passed on

the Vespa, I've said my piece about Aoii; I can die happy now."

"Huh?" Something about his phrasing bothered me. A blurt of suspicion leapt from my tongue, but I posed my question anyhow. "What's that supposed to mean? You make it sound like you're on your way to the afterlife or something."

"Hahaha. Nah, it's just . . ." His mouth curled into a smile of defeat, or possibly resignation. "I just figure I'll probably be the next one who gets killed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means just what it sounds like. Or maybe it doesn't mean anything at all. Anyway, see ya later," he said without giving me a straight answer. He waved a hand at me, turned his back on Kitanotenman Shrine, and started walking. I thought to stop him, but decided against it just before saying anything.

I sighed.

The bequeathed Vespa.

I wondered if it was really okay to use it, but somehow I knew that if I didn't, nobody would. It certainly would make life more convenient. And I wouldn't have to borrow Miiko-san's Fiat as much. Maybe that was what Mikoko-chan had been hoping for all along.

There was something a little amusing about that idea. Just a little.

"Guess I'll have to buy myself a parking space."

I didn't know how that was done. Deciding I'd have to ask Miiko-san about it, I returned home.

2

Whoa. Is that Mikoko-chan over there?

Yup, that's right. Long time no see, Ikkun.

Uhhh, oh. I get it. This is a dream.

Ahaha. You catch on quick, Ikkun. I guess that's about what you'd expect from such a realist. Or are you a romanticist? Or maybe you're a classicist. Half and half, maybe. And then you're one-third pessimist.

I'm not sure that adds up.

True.

Hey, you're not really Mikoko-chan, are you?

Oops. You got me. Well, who do you think I am?

Beats me. Who?

You decide. It's your dream, after all.

Okay, you're Tomo-chan, then.

Why do you think that? You might be wrong. I could be Kunagisa-san or Aikawa-san or Muimi-chan or Akiharu-kun or Miiko-san or Suzunashi-san or anyone else.

I can talk to everyone else whenever I want. I can't talk to you. You're the only person I want to talk to that I can't.

Liar. You know there are others.

No, no, no. I don't want to talk to them anymore.

Okay, fine. If you say so. Well then, let's talk. Let's discuss all the things we didn't get to that day.

Really? Okay, sure. In that case, there's one question I've wanted to ask you.

What?

Do you hate the killer?

The one who killed me? The answer is just as you thought—not even a little bit. We talked about it on that day, didn't we? I said I

want to be reborn. It was myself that I hated. I don't think of my death as unfortunate in the slightest.

Sounds like you're just saying that.

Well, sure. Anything you put into words sounds that way. Say, Ikkun, do you ever read mystery novels?

I don't read much in general. I used to, but now I just do it when I need to kill time. But I basically know what mystery novels are like.

I see. I'm a big fan. I'll read anything, but mysteries are my favorite. They're easy to understand. But one thing I don't like is how they always put so much emphasis on the criminal's motives. I mean, I know you must need a pretty good reason to do something like kill a person. After all, the risk is so high.

Yeah. A peer of mine said something like that once. The risk is high, but the return is low. Of course, that guy turned out to be a human failure who could only prove himself by killing others.

But, you know, a motive is nothing more than an excuse. It's just a plea to a person's sympathies. When you think about it, it all comes down to the morals of the individual. Do you know this saying? 'A gentleman kills not for himself, but for justice and for the sake of others.' But hang on a second there. What does that mean, 'for the sake of others'? What is 'justice'? I don't know the answer.

I don't know either. Sounds like it's just a means of self-justification. I don't know what your killer was thinking. Or maybe I just don't want to know.

Why not?

Because I can't sense any rhyme or reason to it. I mean, things obviously aren't that clear regarding Mikoko-chan's death either, but in your case it's like everything was totally uncalculated. Like your death was just improvised.

Yeah, maybe. But does it matter? I'm not angry about it, and I'm not sad that I'm dead, either. Really, it's no lie. I'm not the least bit resentful.

And so now you're going to be reborn as Mikoko-chan?

Yup.

But she's dead too.

She is, isn't she?

How do you feel about that? Your own death aside, how do you feel toward the person who sent Mikoko-chan to death? No resentment there either?

I guess I don't really have an opinion.

Isn't that a little cold? You were friends, weren't you?

It's a little funny hearing that from you of all people.

I've got a friend myself.

Kunagisa-san? Or could it be Miiko-san? I know it's not Muimi-chan or Akiharu-kun, right? But I think you're like me, Ikkun—even if a friend dies, I don't feel sadness. I know how to be sad, but I just can't seem to set foot into that domain. I must have less emotion than the average person.

I can't say I don't understand.

Maybe it's a matter of distrust toward human beings? Like I've suffered some fatal wound that's destroyed my trust in others. A person once persecuted can never believe in another human being for the rest of their life.

I think you're going too far there.

You don't think that.

Yes, I do.

No, you don't.

No, I don't.

People who realize how much human beings love to discriminate can never trust anyone. Japanese people are particularly like that. Like, let's say someone's friend is being victimized by some group. It's one person versus many. Now obviously, the right thing to do is to

stick up for the friend. But the average person wouldn't do that. They would go with the group. Human beings crave to belong to a group. They don't even care who the group is. All that matters is that they have a group and that people are with them. What kind of group it is doesn't matter at all. It doesn't have any meaning or value. And once you realize this cruel fact, it's impossible to trust people. For example, do you have a family, Ikkun?

If I didn't, I wouldn't exist.

That's not what I mean.

Yeah, they're alive and well. I think they're somewhere around Kobe. We haven't seen each other in years, though. Now that you mention it, Mikoko-chan once told me that I didn't seem like the type to show any devotion to my parents. True enough. I haven't seen them since I was in junior high. You probably could call me a bad son.

Sounds like your household has some issues.

Nah, not really. Not at all. We didn't have any problems, actually. If I had been aware of any problems at all, I probably wouldn't have turned out like the person I am. What about you? Do you have a family?

Uh-uh. Not anybody that really feels like one. That's why I decided on a university so far from home. Mikoko-chan and the others apparently had similar situations.

You mean you all couldn't trust your own families?

Yeah, that's right. I can't even trust myself. I don't remember who it was who said "there's nothing sure in this world," but that's about what it feels like. It feels like the whole world is fragile and threatening to topple over and shatter to pieces at the slightest nudge. But in reality, that isn't the world, but myself.

Sounds like you're damaged goods.

You said it. I mean, think about it. Would you define a person who has never cried since the day she was born as well rounded? I can

form a smile, but is that enough for you to be able to say I'm a decent human being?

I'm the same way. I used to try to write it off as individuality.

What about now?

Not now. Individuality can go eat some shit. Being different isn't necessarily good. Anyone who's ever thought about the effect being radically different would never preach such nonsense. People talk about "the chosen ones," gifted individuals who have left their mark on history. Most of those people were probably totally messed up. But they were just regular people, all the same. They weren't outcasts. They were just regular people, except that they were broken. But Tomo-chan. From what you're saying, it sounds like you don't trust Muimi-chan, Akiharu-kun, and Mikoko-chan, nor do you have any faith in them.

Yeah. I won't deny that. In fact, I'll confirm it. You know, I think you of all people must understand how inferior that makes me feel. You know what a nice girl Mikoko-chan is. Akiharu-kun's a good guy, too, and Muimi-chan is of a rare breed nowadays whose loyalty to friends runs all the way to the bone. The idea that I can't trust people like that, that no matter how hard I try, I can't truly think of them as friends, makes me feel like a filthy human being. They've shown me so much love, and I can't give anything back.

I know how you feel. It's a sense of guilt.

Yeah, that's it. So it's good that a flawed specimen like me passed on.

What about Mikoko-chan?

That's Mikoko-chan's problem. I'm already dead. There's nothing I can say. And, Ikkun, that's not really what you're here to ask, is it?

Well, I dunno. There were a ton of things I wanted to talk about. No, actually there were only a couple. By which I mean there was just one.

Go ahead.

Is it okay for me to be alive?

Ahhh, now that is a fine question.

As a member of this colony known as mankind who contributes nothing toward their collective gain, do I have a right to live?

I think I could have easily presented the same question myself. I mean, if I weren't already dead. Well . . . in regards to that question, I only have one word for you.

Huh? What is it?

It's —

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep

I awoke to an unpleasant electronic noise, groaned, and got up.

Not from my futon, but directly off the floor where I had apparently been sleeping. I had had an awful dream. It had progressed so arbitrarily and with such self-indulgence that it made me disgusted with myself. As if I had completely figured out Tomo-chan's inner psyche after less than an hour of talking to her.

And yet I couldn't shake the odd feeling that the dream had been real.

"But what the hell am I doing holding debates with dead people?"

Could it be that I was still feeling a bit regretful?

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep. In other words, even now—*beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep*—even now, I—*beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep*—

Nah, let's set that aside for now.

This wasn't my alarm clock. It was the ringtone from my cell phone. Despising musical ringtones, my phone was still set to its default ring, but even that wasn't very pleasant. I picked up the phone and pressed the send button.

"Yes, hello?"

". . . ."

Huh. No answer. But I could sense breathing on the other end. Maybe it was a weak signal.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

. . . . .

"Hello? Can you hear my voice? Not so much?"

Silence. It was strange. Maybe the phone itself was broken. I had recently thrown it into the laundry with my pants, after all. But modem electronics weren't so fragile. In which case, maybe it was a crank call.

"If you don't say anything, I'm gonna go ahead and hang up, okay? Is that okay?"

With inappropriate timing, my mind began to wander to the time Mikoko-chan had called and gotten all flustered thinking it was a wrong number.

"Okay, I'm hanging up. Commencing countdown. Five, four, three, two—"

. . . .

Whoa. I'd heard something. But it was too soft to make out.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't catch that. Could you say it again, please?"

"Kamogawa Park."

"I'm sorry? Kamogawa?"

"I'm waiting at Kamogawa Park. . . ."

The voice faded in and out, my eardrums just barely able to pick it up. I couldn't tell if it was a male or female, adult or child. There was no discernible intonation, so I couldn't even determine what emotions the caller was attempting to convey.

"I'm sorry? Please say that again. And who is this?"

"Mikoko."

The voice said only that, and the call ended.

I tossed the phone on the floor, stood up, and stretched my hands up toward the ceiling. It was low enough that I could reached it if I exerted myself. Who lived above me again?

Oh, right, the fifteen-year-old brother and thirteen-year-old sister. Those two shared a closeness that made even me smile. Of course they were just barely surviving, so maybe that wasn't an appropriate reaction.

The apartment building was three stories tall, with two rooms per floor, meaning there were a total of six rooms, two of which were currently vacant. The brother and sister upstairs lived next to the old hermit. He was into Christianity, which meant he probably would've clashed quite a bit with Miiko-san's ultra-Japaneseness, but by no means were they enemies. Both rooms on the first floor were vacant, but the landlord said someone would be coming in next month. Even a place like this had a pretty impressive draw of tenants.

I plopped back down on the floor and picked up the abandoned phone. Checking the call history, I discovered that, sure enough, the call was from an unknown number.

Now let's think about this. "Kamogawa Park. That's definitely what they said."

So they were waiting there? Okay, fine. That was fine, for now. The problem was with what the caller said after that, when I asked for a name. How had they answered?

" 'Mikoko' . . . yeah, I definitely heard 'Mikoko.' "

There wasn't likely to be another person on earth with a bizarre name like that. But at the same time, it couldn't have been Mikoko. She was dead. If dead people could use telephones, the whole telephone infrastructure would've gone to hell in a handbasket long ago.

. . . .

With what little information I currently had, thinking would do no good at all. Something about that made me feel a little empty inside.

I deleted the call from the phone's history and checked the time on the LCD display.

Eleven thirty at night.

Wednesday, May twenty-fifth.

. . . .

Huh. How had I spent the day again?

I seemed to remember waking up at just around noon. Then I had gone out to visit Kunagisa, had run into Akiharu-kun along the way, inherited Mikoko-chan's Vespa, returned to my apartment to ask Miiko-san about the parking-space thing, gotten frustrated by the hassle of the parking-space thing, and gone to bed in a huff.

"In a huff? What's wrong with me?"

What was I, a little kid?

Anyway, that was around two in the afternoon. I had no recollection of what had occurred between then and now, meaning I had slept for nearly ten hours. That was enough to make even Sleeping Beauty gawk in disgust. I had been awake for less than three of the twenty-four hours in May twenty-fifth.

"I've been sleeping like mad lately. . . ."

Anyway, then had come the phone call. A bizarre, garbled phone call with no context, just words. I didn't know its meaning. Or rather, its meaning was the *only* thing I knew.

"Well, whatever."

I had two choices. One, I could obey the caller's request and head down to Kamogawa Park; or two, I could ignore it. Now, obviously, common sense would dictate that the latter was the correct choice. But I didn't know a thing about common sense. And besides, I couldn't just sit idly by when the caller was throwing a name like that around. It didn't take long for me to reach a decision.

I washed my face and changed clothes.

"This is the first real piece of nonsense I've encountered in awhile," I said to myself.

I left a note behind and left the building. I mounted my Vespa, which was tentatively parked illegally in a nearby alleyway until I was able to secure a parking space. I could've just walked, but Kamogawa Park was a bit far. The caller hadn't designated any specific meeting time, but I figured the sooner the better.

I turned east onto Imadegawa Street and drove straight ahead.

Still, I wondered, returning to my original train of thought, what was that dream all about?

I didn't believe in ghosts or apparitions or the afterlife or that sort of thing, nor was I sure they didn't exist. People do have unexplainable experiences, after all, and I wasn't so hardheaded as to claim I didn't believe in something about which I truly knew nothing. Having said that, this wasn't some piece of classical literature, so it wasn't like somebody else had en-

tered my dream. It had been a product of my consciousness, and mine alone.

"Was it lingering attachment? Desire?"

Either way, it was only an illusion. Nothing to lose sleep over, so to speak. The important thing was that it was Tomo-chan who had appeared in my dream, not Mikoko-chan. Surely this was a crime.

"Face your crimes. That is your punishment." So Suzunashi-san had told me one day in February. She was no psychic, but she could see through me. She was the kind of woman who commanded respect, yet never made you feel inferior. Perhaps that was a rare thing.

I passed Horikawa, Torimaru, and Kawara-machi Streets, eventually arriving in Kamogawa. Even if it was the middle of the night, I couldn't just ride a scooter through the park, so I parked it by a bridge and headed down to the riverbank, also known as Kamogawa Park.

"Ahh, so, now what?"

The name Kamogawa Park, in reality, represented a ridiculously enormous area of land. It wasn't spacious, exactly, just *long*. And the opposite side of the river was considered part of it. There wasn't an idiot in all of Kyoto who would arrange a meeting here without designating a specific street name.

"Well, whatever."

I probably didn't have to take a random phone call like that so seriously anyway. I began walking down the river in the direction of the current. Looking at my watch, I saw that it was already past midnight. It was Thursday, May twenty-sixth. It occurred to me that there wasn't much left to the month of May. Being here reminded me that it was along this very river that Zerozaki had nearly killed me, right under the

big Shijô Bridge. At the time, neither Tomo-chan nor Mikoko-chan had died yet.

That felt like ages ago. And I didn't think it was just my imagination.

I looked back. It was hard to tell because it was so dark, but there didn't seem to be anyone else around. Even though I had felt something.

A gaze.

"Hmm . . ."

I had felt it this afternoon when I was with Akiharu-kun as well. He had suggested that it might have been Mikoko-chan's ghost, but what was a more realistic possibility? The most likely explanation seemed to be that the police had sent someone to tail me. After all, I was involved in the deaths of both Tomo-chan and Mikoko-chan.

"But come on, at this hour?"

Besides, there was no reason for them to have to sneak around. So on to the next possibility. A being of origins unknown had summoned me on the telephone, and when I arrived at the designated place, I felt somebody's gaze. There was really only one possible explanation here.

. . . .

I boosted my alertness a tad and kept walking. The strange gaze seemed to vanish. It was around Maruta-machi Street that I began to feel like a doofus. What the hell was I doing here?

"I suppose I could just leave."

I climbed back up the embankment onto the road. I crossed the bridge to the other side of the river and descended to the park below. I thought it would be a nice change of scenery if I switched sides for the walk back. Looking out at

the river, I saw some ducks swimming around. Was that why it was called Kamogawa—or Duck River? It seemed peculiar that someone had actually named the river that for such a bland reason.

I thought about hurrying back home to get to bed, but then I realized I had just slept. Since I had come all the way out, it might not have been a bad idea to take the Vespa for a spin around Kyoto. If I kept parallel to the river, I could drive to Maizuru. It would be good for getting used to my newly acquired vehicle, not to mention for killing time.

Even as I pondered this, I continued walking straight ahead. When I was approaching Imadegawa Street, I spotted a shadowy figure huddled on the ground in front of me. Next to it was a fallen bicycle. It was hard to make out because of the darkness, but it looked like the figure was actually a person who had collapsed. It lay motionless with its back to me. I wondered if it was a sleeping homeless person, but if that were the case there probably wouldn't have been a bike nearby. Perhaps someone had gone drinking out in Kiya-machi and fallen off their bike passing through the park. Though I had little sympathy, I couldn't just leave a person there like that. The figure's long, black hair led me to believe it was a woman.

"Are you all right?" I called out, but received no reply. It almost seemed like the person was dead. Frankly, it was a definite possibility. Just falling off a bike was enough to kill a person if they had a bad landing. All the more if the person was drunk. I considered the idea of just passing on by, but it just didn't seem right, so I ran over and tapped the figure on the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" I checked one more time. The figure didn't move an inch. "Are you all right?" I asked a third time, and decided I should at least turn the figure onto its back. The instant I gave the shoulders a tug, the figure, which had been completely still until now, flipped over with incredible nimbleness and sprayed some kind of mist in my face.

I tried to spring backward, but my timing was off. A dull pain ran through my left cheek. As I realized I had been struck, I slammed down into the riverbank onto my back without even managing to roll.

My attacker stood up.

Not good. Either because I had been struck or because of whatever that mist was, my eyes wouldn't focus. What the hell was that stuff? My eyes didn't hurt enough for it to be Mace. I forced my hobbling body up to a kneel and tried to push myself up with my left hand, but the attacker was closing in fast. I gave up on that idea and began rolling away instead, spinning myself around more times than was even necessary. When I had distanced myself about thirty feet from the attacker, I managed to rise onto one knee.

The shadowy figure stood still before me. I could see that it was a person of considerable height, but I couldn't make out the body frame. My vision still wasn't coming back. But that wasn't the only thing that wasn't stable. My feet, my knees, and my head were just as bad. I thought I might collapse any second. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was more like I was falling into something. Yes. To put it simply, I felt . . . sleepy.

The knee that was supporting me collapsed.

Spray anesthetic? And this wasn't your ordinary anti-pervert concoction; this was high-powered stuff. Not only my eyes, but all of my physical faculties had been disabled. Maybe

this kind of stuff is common in America, but I had never even laid eyes on it (literally) in Japan.

My assailant approached me, one step at a time. Even with my blurry vision, I could make out the knife in this person's right hand. A knife. Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The Kyoto prowler. My mind was a mess.

"Why?"

"Who? Why? Of course, neither of these things mattered in regards to the current problem at hand."

Even with my mind all fogged up, I knew exactly how bad it would be if I fell asleep at a time like this. It would mean either death or something close enough.

Dammit. This was no time for hesitation, but I just couldn't work up the nerve to do anything that would cause myself harm. I couldn't help but hesitate. Naturally, my attacker approached at a leisurely pace. I would be asleep in no time anyway. But I knew this would be my one and only opening.

Right hand or left?

I deliberated for only a moment before deciding on the right. "Jesus Christ, man. Who am I, Nenbutsu no Tetsu?" I gripped the thumb on my right hand with my left hand. I hesitated for just one more second, then gave it a yank as hard as I could in the wrong direction.

"*Gyyyyaaaaahhhhh!*" I let out a scream so piercing that even my own ears hurt, and it reverberated throughout all of Kamogawa Park.

It was now either broken or dislocated. Either way, my sleepiness had cleared up. I recollected myself all at once, and my vision, physical functionality, and alertness returned to

normal. Pain ran through my entire body as I stood to face my enemy.

My attacker was clad all in black, complete with black ski mask and black leather gloves. No hair was visible. The long black hair I'd seen before was a wig. My vision had restored itself, but it was still hard to make out my assailant's figure against the dark background. This must have been why I thought it was a shadow at first. It occurred to me that the attacker had definitely showed up dressed and prepared for an ambush. This person looked far more like a killer than Zerozaki—and far more like a prowler.

"Dammit . . . who are you?"

Naturally, there was no answer. All I could hear was the attacker's creepy breathing. Whoever it was pointed the knife at me and slowly closed in. I didn't have a single item that might have been used as a weapon, and I had left my cell phone in my room. I couldn't even call for help.

"Well, you gotta do what you gotta do. . . ."

I got into a fighting stance, and began to close in on the distance from my end. Evidently surprised by this action, the one in black came a second late with the knife. I attempted to deal a palm strike to the jaw, which of course missed as the enemy leaped backward and once again brandished the knife at me.

The one in black was the next to make a move. He lunged at me with the knife. But it was the motion of a novice. This person was nothing compared to Zerozaki, and dodging was a simple task. However, as I jerked my body backward, my thumb bumped into the side of my torso. An intense shock of pain shot through me.

_____!

I regretted breaking it. I probably could have just torn a nail off or something. Or, if I absolutely had to break something, I should have gone with the pinky. Why would I choose the thumb? What was I, an idiot? There's such a thing as limits.

Naturally, the one in black didn't let the opportunity slip away, and gave me a hard shove. Already off balance, I toppled over onto my back. Without sparing a second, the enemy mounted me. I took a moment to reminisce with inappropriate calmness about how this same thing had just happened last month. Now how had I dealt with the situation last time?

Without giving me a moment to think, the knife came down. It was aimed directly at my face—no, my carotid artery. I used every ounce of strength left in me to dodge my head to the right, mostly avoiding the blade. It managed to slice through a single layer of skin. I was bleeding. The one in black pulled the knife back out from the earth of the riverbank it had lodged into, and readied it for another swing. Just as I thought there would be no escape this time, my attacker's hand came to a halt. Looking down at me as if making some observation, my assailant tossed the knife away.

Without any time to contemplate the meaning behind this action, the attacker plunged a fist into my face. The same left cheek from before. The next moment, the opposite cheek took a similar blow. Next, the left cheek took a third blow. Then the right again. The attacker continued this endless barrage of punches to my face, leaving no spaces in between.

I had long since stopped thinking about the pain. I could just feel my brain rattling.

. . . . . ,

Suddenly, the pummeling ceased.

But it didn't take long for me to learn that this was no act of mercy. The one in black clamped both hands around my left shoulder. It was easy to guess what the plan was from here. I tried to resist, but my body would not move the way I commanded it. That paralyzing spray had eaten its way into my core. Coupled with the pain, I was sure to pass out any minute.

Except.

Except that at that exact moment, a deathly excruciating pain shot through my left shoulder with a terrible cracking sound, jarring me back to a fully conscious state. The one in black had dislocated my shoulder joint without the slightest hesitation. On top of that, the attacker then began pummeling it.

"*Nggaaaaaahhhh!!!*" It was a shriek from Hell. I had never known my own vocal cords held such destructive force.

Who the hell was this person? What were they doing all of this for? They didn't want to kill me. This wasn't an act of murder; it was a simple act of destruction. To this attacker, I was nothing more than an object to be dismantled. Something to be pulled apart like a chain-link puzzle.

Next, my assailant went for the right shoulder.

"Ghrr . . ." I had regained consciousness fully. I raised half my body up, shook off the attacker's grip, and swung my fist right into the attacker's heart. The impact was strangely unsatisfying, as if I'd punched a magazine. That black shirt must have been concealing some kind of protective gear.

Having bashed my already broken thumb, I couldn't bear to use my right arm anymore. The one in black brushed it aside like it was nothing and gripped my right shoulder firmly again.

I wasn't lucid enough to shake it off a second time. I heard a dull, cracking sound as if from a great distance. But the pain was right there with me. A torturous pain ran up from both my shoulders into my brain, even managing to penetrate the numbness.

Then, just like before, the attacker began pummeling the newly dislocated joint. And, from there, went straight for my heart—as if exacting revenge. The sound of cracking bone. The impact spread out to my disconnected shoulders, and a dull pain followed an instant behind.

"Uhuhh . . . ahhh . . ."

I gasped for air. The impact of the punch had dealt significant damage to my lungs. Whether that had been my attacker's aim or not, I didn't know, but either way, it made for a prime opening. The attacker gripped my face by the jaw. Hey, now, hey, now, are you serious? That's the most painful thing you can do to a person. But there was no time to make inquiries. I thought I ought to chomp down on the attacker's finger, but I let myself hesitate.

The one in black gave a forceful yank on my jaw. There was a far lighter cracking sound than the one from my shoulders, but the pain was incomparably intense. Then, as had become the routine, the attacker gave my dislocated jaw a swift uppercut.

No voice came out. I couldn't even be bothered to scream anymore.

Allow me to correct myself.

This *was* an act of murder. The destructive nature of it was irrelevant. It was clear now that this person was going to torture me to death. They would make me suffer until I was dead.

Dissect me, piece by piece.

The one in black hesitated for a bit, most likely pondering how to inflict the next dose of agony.

From there, the one in black grabbed the wrist of my limp right arm and held it up, gripping the thumb in one hand.

My already broken thumb.

_____!

Hehehe.

I heard the attacker chuckle.

I was in utter shock. There was nothing as fearsome to me and terrifying in this world as a person who could beat and torture someone this much and still have a good laugh.

The one in black muttered something I couldn't make out, then released my thumb in favor of my index finger. I could tell that the plan was to break it. And not only my index finger. From there, the attacker would move onto the middle finger, ring finger, pinky, and then the left hand. Then would come my feet. Maybe they were going to break every bone in my entire body. Then they would tear apart the flesh. And then, once I had been thoroughly dismantled, maybe they would be kind enough to kill me.

I had already lost the will to fight back. In fact, I didn't even know why I had tried fighting back in the first place. I should have just let the spray put me to sleep in the very beginning. At least then I wouldn't have had to go through all this torture. Why the hell did I break my own thumb? But then again, I probably would have awoken to this pain anyway. I would have gone through the torture either way. If that were the case, then the outcome would have been exactly the same. I had just taken a different route.

This was just like last time—a farce enacted with predestined harmony.

I felt like I was watching myself from afar.

I was watching myself about to be killed from the opposite side of the river.

What was I thinking, seeing myself like that?

Oh, come on, really now.

This is truly ridiculous.

Trivial and pointless.

What a load of nonsense.

"Whattaya doing over theeeeeeeere?!"

A thunderous howl.

My vacant eyes shifted toward the direction of the voice coming from the opposite riverbank. But nobody was there. A small-framed, shadowy figure was charging this way against the river's current.

I didn't even have to wonder who it was. I knew this person as well as I knew myself.

"*Heeeeeeeyyyyy!*"

Zerozaki.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki hollered as he leaped from the river and charged up the bank. The one in black seemed momentarily startled by this new contender, but after assessing the situation, released my finger and backed away from my body. My

attacker must have been aware that Zerozaki was not an opponent you could take on from a sitting position.

With a bit of distance remaining between Zerozaki and us, Zerozaki hurled a single drawing knife in this direction. This wasn't aimed at my attacker, but rather a warning used to distance the attacker from me. Having arrived on this side of the riverbed, Zerozaki got between the attacker and me. The one in black went for the knife that had been tossed aside earlier, and brandished it defensively at Zerozaki.

"Hahhh . . ." Zerozaki exhaled deeply as if adjusting his breathing. "Why do you let people bully you like that? Stand up for yourself, man!" he said mockingly. I thought about saying something in response, but with my jaw dislocated, it was impossible.

"Well, whatever. I guess you're the one I should be talking to now," Zerozaki said, facing the one in black. "So what's your deal? You probably don't want to hear this from me, but you know you're committing a crime, right? Assault and battery, attempted murder. Do you realize that? Are you aware of what's allowed and what's not?"

There were probably any number of comebacks the attacker could have made in this situation, but none were spoken.

The one in black took a cautious step backward. It seemed this unknown assailant viewed Zerozaki, in all of his casualness, with his utter lack of caution, as a true threat.

"Hmm. This sack of damaged goods here has some pretty nasty wounds to be attended to, and I'm not really looking to draw any more attention by killing someone, so if you want to run away, feel free," Zerozaki said after a moment's thought. The one in black took another step back, carefully attempting

to size up Zerozaki. It seemed they were still trying to make a decision.

"What's the matter? I'm telling you I'll let you go, so hurry up and chase yourself somewhere. Quickly now."

The one in black didn't respond.

Zerozaki let out a deliberate sigh. "If you still want to do this, I'd be happy to kill you. You'll be in pieces before you even feel anything. I'm not such a nice guy that I'd show mercy to someone going out of their own way to get cut. But, hey, at least you'll get to be lucky number thirteen. I'll chop you up and line up the pieces for everyone to gawk at."

And that was the decisive remark.

The one in black spun around and dashed away in the direction of Imadegawa.

"Go on, go on," Zerozaki said, laughing. Then he turned to face me. That tattooed face entered my field of vision, only to go blurry an instant later. It seemed the anesthetizing effects of the spray had reached a new peak.

"Hm? Hey, don't go to sleep on me. At least give me your address first."

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. Of course, my shoulders were both dislocated, so this hurt like a bitch, but at this point, I didn't even care.

"Ugh . . ." With the last few drops of my consciousness, and through a dislocated jaw, I told him my address.

3

My next memory began Friday the twenty-seventh, at right around nine o'clock a.m.

"Yo. Morning, sunshine."

Zerozaki was right by my pillow. I looked at his face in a daze, having no idea what was going on. Zerozaki himself, on the other hand, seemed relaxed, and genuinely glad that I had woken up.

"Man, this place is incredible. It was impossible to find from that address. And the people here are crazy. I went to borrow some bandages and stuff from that chick next door, and she wasn't even surprised by my face. I've never met a chick like that. But I'm glad you're awake. You must've been pretty sleep deprived, huh? I guess you've been through a lot."

"Uhhh . . ."

I planted my right hand down in an attempt to prop myself up. An intense pain ran through me. "Gah!" I reflexively pulled my hand away and began to fall back down, but somehow managed to catch myself with my left arm.

"Nice one, man. It's broken, you know. Your finger, I mean. I jammed your jaw and shoulders back in place best I could, but there's nothing I can do about a broken bone. I did some emergency first aid, but I think you'll probably want to take a visit to the hospital later."

Looking at my right hand, I saw that my thumb had been stabilized with a large amount of bandages, wire, and a splint. Though far from orthodox, it did seem as though he had cared for it properly. I could also feel something strange on my face. It seemed my jaw had also been stabilized, with plaster and

gauze. Zerozaki must have been taking care of me while I was sleeping.

"Thank you," I said.

"Forget about it," he said, waving a hand at me irritably. "But that thumb is looking pretty bad. It's gonna make life hard, you know," he teased. I guess one man's pain is another man's amusement, killer or not.

"No worries. I'm ambidextrous."

"Really?"

"Originally I was left-handed, but I corrected it when I was young and became right-handed. But I had a teacher I hated who used to say 'chopsticks go in your right hand,' so I switched back to left out of spite. That was back in the third grade."

"You're kidding."

"Yeah, sorry."

I struggled to return myself to full consciousness. I could get up just fine, but my head was swimming.

"Hey, by the way, where's the Vespa?"

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"Ah, nothing."

It was probably still sitting abandoned by the bridge in Imadegawa. I just had to go retrieve it at some point. If it hadn't been towed away, that is. More significant was the fact that Zerozaki had carried me all the way back here on foot with that small body of his. His physical strength was truly admirable.

Zerozaki, meanwhile, didn't seem to think anything of it, and was as calm as ever.

"But what the hell was that back there? I can't believe you and I ended in a standoff, and yet you still let a clumsy oaf like

that get the better of you," he said. His reasoning was a little sketchy.

"That thing with you was special. Yeah . . . I mean, kind of." I lifted myself up, taking care not to do anything to my thumb. "Yesterday . . . wait, was it yesterday? I got a call saying to come to Kamogawa Park. In retrospect, it was an obvious trap, but anyway, I fell for it. Hence, my current situation."

"Wow. What are you, an idiot?"

Indeed. "Yeah, I know it was dumb," I said. "But let me ask you something. What are you still doing in Kyoto? Didn't you leave?"

"Huh? How'd you know?"

"The killings stopped."

"Ah, right, that. Yeah, I did leave for a while. I got attacked by some weird lady in red. She was like this crazy maniac on speed, man. I hit her with my bike and she kept coming at me like it was nothin'. It's a liter bike, man. What the hell kind of shape is she in? Anyway, she was dead set on catching me, but I was no match for her, so I fled to Osaka. Of course, she came after me. So I came *back* to Kyoto, cuz you know what they say, the darkest place is right under the candlestick. Anyway, so the day I came back, I was trudging around when I heard a howling like a whipped dog. Being the card-carrying dog lover that I am, I couldn't just sit around and listen to that, so I ran toward the direction of the voice only to find that it was you, getting your ass handed to you by that thing in black."

"So that's what happened. I gotcha."

He'd rattled out the second half of the explanation awfully fast, as if he'd gotten tired of explaining. But I basically got the

point. Basically, what it came down to was that I'd gotten really, really lucky.

Either that, or the one in black was unlucky.

"But man, who the hell was that red lady, anyway? I thought I had run into the Red Death."

"It's Aikawa-san," I said. It wasn't my way of expressing gratitude, it was just that it seemed unfair to give Aikawa-san information on him and then not show him the same courtesy. Then again, I wasn't sure a guy like me should be using a word like *unfair*.

"Aikawa?" Zerozaki said, his tattoo twisting into a dubious grimace. "Did you just say 'Aikawa'? You mean that was Aikawa Jun?"

"Oh, you know her? I guess that means I don't have to bother explaining, then."

"Nah, I just heard about her from the 'General,' that's all. Dammit, why, of all people, did it have to be Aikawa Jun?" he whined. "There's no hope now."

"Is she famous or something?"

"She's *infamous*. Do you have any idea what they call her? 'The Sturm and Drang,' 'The Mighty Warrior,' 'The Laughing Red Tigress,' 'The Killer of Mountain Men,' 'The Desert Eagle' . . . They told me not to have anything to do with her."

"You forgot one."

"Huh?"

" 'Mankind's Greatest Private Contractor,' " I said, to which Zerozaki didn't respond. His expression was more serious than I'd ever seen him. When confronted with an opponent like Aikawa Jun, even he couldn't play it casually.

"Shit, man, this is not good. This is just too much of a masterpiece . . ." he muttered to himself. He gave a weak nod. "Well then." He rose to his feet. "I'm gonna go."

"What? Already?"

"Yeah. I shouldn't really be lingering around doing nothing. It looks like I've got some things to think over. There's nothing to do here anyway, and you're really in no shape to be talking at length. Besides, I'm a wanted man right now. I can't stick around in one place for too long."

"Ah, okay."

This was all true. When I gave Aikawa-san a description of Zerozaki, the word must have spread all the way to the police. She wasn't his only enemy now. For Zerozaki, spending a whole day in this one room was like stepping into the red zone.

"What if you just turned yourself in?"

"Not a bad idea, but I'm gonna pass on that," he said with a grin. "Just be sure you take care of *your* problems. I saw it in the paper and all. That Aoii girl you were talking about got killed, huh?"

"Yeah, well."

"Looks like we've both got some shit to sort out."

"Yeah. This has been the biggest hassle ever."

"Same here. But hey, that's life. These are the tracks we're riding. Anyway, that's it for me."

"We probably won't meet again after this," I said.

"No doubt," he said, laughing. "Farewell."

With that, he left from my room. Left alone, I returned to my futon and lay down. He had either done a fine job of taking care of me, or my wounds hadn't been that bad to begin

with, because I hardly felt any pain. Of course I would probably have to go to the hospital to check out that broken bone.

Right now, though, I needed sleep. Was the anesthetic still active? No, that didn't seem plausible. So this was just regular old tiredness. Why had I been sleeping so much lately?

"Ah, I get it. I was sleeping, but I wasn't *asleep*."

At last, I had reached my limit. I shut my eyes, deciding to put off going to the hospital until after I had slept. I was probably getting myself in too deep lately. I kept trying not to think about Tomo-chan and Mikoko-chan, but I was thinking about them all the while. That dream I had was sure enough proof of that. I still hadn't figured out a conclusion to this murder case.

For now, I just needed rest. I decided to put off thinking about that phone trap and the one in black until after sleeping.

"Hey."

But right now I wouldn't even be allowed to sleep. I heard knocking, and a voice coming through the door. I got up and hobbled over to answer it. Zerozaki had returned.

"What? Forget something?"

"Yeah, sort of. I was going to tell you one more thing." He entered the room again and sat down cross-legged. I returned to my futon and sat down as well.

"Yeah, what is it? You made such a big show of leaving."

"Well, I forgot about this. What do you want me to do? Hey, check your phone."

"Huh? Why?"

"You got a few calls while you were sleeping."

"Huh. Around what time?"

"Just this morning. It kept going 'beep beep beep beep.' *So* annoying. Isn't that what woke you up?"

I took a look at the phone's call history as I listened to Zerozaki rambling on. The calls had come from a familiar number. I knew I had seen it before.

"Ahh, right, it was Sasaki-san," I said, realizing. This number belonged to that detective currently absorbed in a war of attrition, Sasa Sasaki-san. Between eight and nine o'clock this morning, my phone had received seven calls from her number. "I wonder what she wants."

"I didn't pick up, so don't ask me. I shouldn't be answering your phone, right? If you're curious, just call her back."

"I will."

I entered in her number.

"Who's Sasaki again? I feel like I know that name."

"I think I mentioned her that time at karaoke. She's that hotshot detective."

"Ah, right," he said with a complex expression. The word *detective* probably didn't sit too well with Zerozaki these days. Of course, it didn't leave such a great impression on me either.

The signal seemed to connect, and it continued to the dial tone. I waited a few seconds.

"Yeah, Sasa here," came Sasaki-san's voice.

"Hello, it's me."

"What were you doing earlier?"

"Nothing, just sleeping."

"I see . . . Yeah, that's fine." There was something strangely cool and reserved about her. It sounded like she was *forcing* herself to be cool and reserved. Which meant that right now, she wasn't really cool or reserved at all.

“Sasaki-san, did something happen? Or is there something else you wanted to ask me?”

“Something happened,” she said. “Usami Akiharu-san was murdered.”

Suddenly.

Everything.

Connected.

“Usami-kun, you say?”

“Yes.”

“You're sure?”

“Do I seem like the kind of person who would make up a lie like that? This morning a friend discovered the body at school. He's been strangled, just like Emoto-san and Aoii-san. I’m at the scene right now.”

Now that she mentioned it, it did sound like she was speaking so as not to disturb the people around her. She was probably surrounded by police officers, medical examiners, and gawking onlookers.

Akiharu-kun.

Hadn’t he said he would be next? Oddly, his words had become a reality.

“Really . . .”

But this was probably no simple coincidence. If Akiharu-kun had figured out the truth, then it would make sense that he could foresee his own death. And yet even knowing this, he had let himself be killed all the same.

“I’d like to ask you some things, if you would come . . .”

“Before that,” I interrupted, “I want to ask you about Akiharu-kun’s body. Do you mind?”

"Go ahead." As if she could sense through my voice alone that something was different about me, she made no objection. "I'll answer anything I can."

"I just have one question. Is there another '*x* over *y*' left behind at the crime scene?"

"Yes," she softly affirmed after a moment of silence. "But this time it's strange. We can't say anything for certain yet, but this time evidence suggests it was written by the victim himself. Yeah. But why do you ask? Have you thought of something? Did you figure out what *x* over *y* means?"

No, that wasn't it.

I had already figured out the meaning of that formula long ago. Or rather, at this point, it *had* no meaning. That wasn't the issue right now.

"No, that's not it. Okay, so should I head down to the police station later?"

"I'd appreciate it. What time is good for you?"

"This afternoon . . . no, this evening."

"Okay, then I'll—"

I hung up while she was talking. If I hadn't, I would've said something regrettable. I wasn't so coolheaded myself right now. I threw my cell phone at the floor with a violent force normally unthinkable for a guy like me.

"Hey now, what are you doing?" Zerozaki said in surprise. "Are you crazy? Don't throw your phone. Look at the poor thing."

"This is what they call *venting*," I said dimly. "That is, suppressing your anger by taking it out on an inanimate object."

"Yeah, I know that." He picked up the phone, checked to see that it wasn't broken, and then put it down away from me.

"What happened?"

“Akiharu-kun was just murdered.”

“Ah, that’s, wow . . .” he said curiously as if impressed. “That’s the third person, huh? Pretty hot stuff, whoever this is. When’d it happen?”

“I don’t know when he was killed, but they just found the body now. So the murder must have been between Wednesday afternoon and this morning."

“Hmm. That’s quite the masterpiece. Three strangulations in just ten days. That’s crazy. Ah, but I guess I can’t say stuff like that. So what about the killer? Whodunnit?”

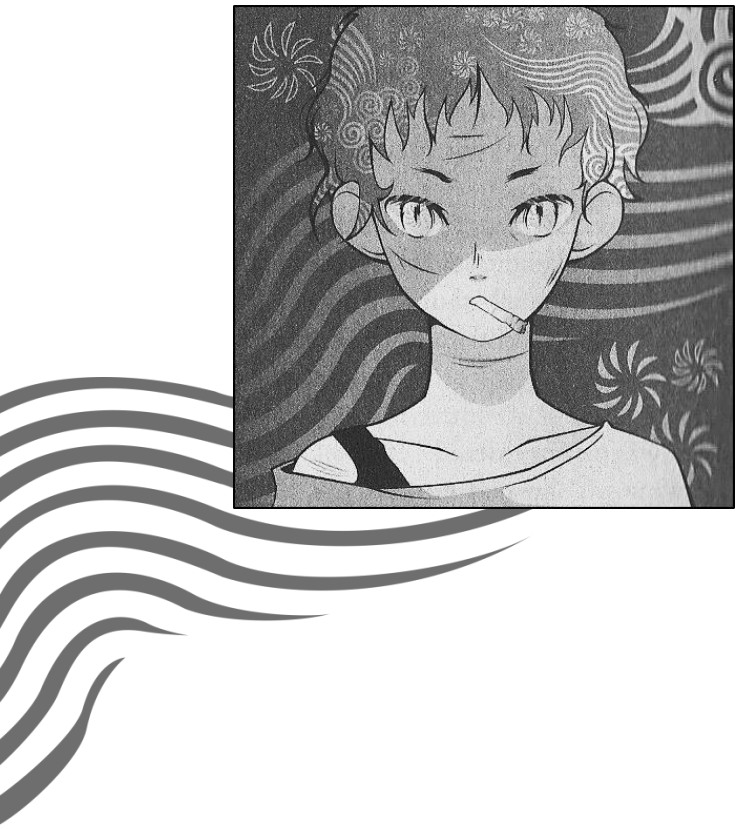
Zerozaki asked as if it was the most trivial matter in the world.

I sputtered angrily. The killer? You mean the one who killed Emoto Tomoe who killed Aoii Mikoko, who attacked me in Kamogawa Park, and now has killed Usami Akiharu?”

“Who else would I mean?”

“It should be obvious.” I declared the name with such rigidity that even I was taken aback. “Obviously it was Atemiya Muimi.”

Atemiya Muimi, classmate.



8

TRIAL

Mentality

You actually know, don't you?

1

It's not often that I get complimented on my personality even now, but back in the days when those around me still referred to me as a young boy, I suppose I had an abnormally unpleasant personality. To be sure, there was a time when I thought myself highly intelligent and gifted, when I was in love with myself and naturally looked down on those around me. I believed I knew things nobody else knew, I had noticed things nobody else had noticed, and as the years rolled by, I grew arrogant.

That probably explains it.

If I was posed with a puzzling question and couldn't soon find the answer, I would get antsy. That was how capable I thought I was, and it was also true that after managing to wipe all my doubts away simply by thinking about them, I always felt like I had accomplished something remarkable. Like I had become somebody.

However, as I was discovering the answers to a series of difficult questions that emerged—no, *after I finished* answering all of them—I found that I was left with a void.

Everybody else was just going on enjoying their lives without having to do such things. They were living happily without ever having to come up with these answers, or even questions, for that matter.

They laughed, they cried, at times they got angry.

I thought this was because they were ignorant.

I thought they were all just naively frolicking about in a minefield. I thought that one day they would come to curse their own foolishness.

When they stepped on a mine and everything was over, then they'd regret it.

But I was wrong.

I was just some lonely kid living in a world I had made for myself, inventing questions and answering them just to make myself feel better. I seriously thought I could just use theories to compensate for real-life experiences, and I thought that if I wanted, even I could be happy.

I was being a boy incorrectly.

Nevertheless, the world didn't come to an end.

The game went on.

Even thought I was already so behind that there wasn't even a smidgen of a chance of victory, my life went on. There was a period where I considered ending it myself, and in fact I did try to do so, but I even failed at that.

In reality, maybe I wasn't even an onlooker: I was a loser.

I was just a sad, pathetic loser.

And so at some point, I stopped being able to actively pursue answers to my questions. It wasn't that I became passive, it was that I became apathetic toward the questions.

Answers have no real point.

They're vague and ambiguous and unsound, and things are fine that way. In fact, they're better.

Causing real change is a role that should be left up to the true "chosen ones," outstanding individuals like that scarlet Mankind's Greatest, and the Blue Savant, and it was never my responsibility.

It was no job for a common loser. For the comic sidekick.

Being oblivious to the mines, even if you stepped on one—now that was the way to live.

Even if you knew about the mines but pretended you didn't, sooner or later you would really forget about them.

That's what I believe, even if people say you're incurable at that point, that it's just some proposal for compromise, that you're only pretending to be a human being.

That's what I thought, as I looked into the mirror at the me who hadn't lost.

Wasn't it simple?

If I hadn't been a loser, I would've just been a failure.

If being a homicidal monster was the alternative, being a loser was fine.

I'm sure he felt the same way.

If being a loser was the alternative, being a homicidal monster was fine.

Both statements were nonsense.

They were nonsense, and they were masterpieces.

And that was fine. That was enough.

Everything was fine the way it was.

The girl who asked me if I ever felt like damaged goods. The girl who said she liked me. The boy who prophesied that he would be the next to die. And you, who called me clueless.

Okay.

It may not be my role to change things, but ending the nonsense I'm responsible for starting is up to me indeed.

Let's stick to tradition and put a clean end to this.

Muimi-chan.

• • •

I jammed the stiletto knife Zerozaki had loaned me into the keyhole and jiggled it around. In about a minute, I heard the sound of the bolt unlatching. I gripped the knob and gave it a pull. The chain was up, so the door only moved a few centimeters.

I hesitated for but a moment. I swung the knife in the gap and broke the chain off. The links were more brittle than I expected, and they scattered everywhere, one even hitting me in the face. I didn't care. The door released from its bondage, I pulled it open and entered the room.

The spectacle inside was enough to leave me speechless.

The wallpaper was torn up, with shards of shattered dishes strewn about on the floor. I thought it might be dangerous to remove my shoes, and although I knew it was rude, I entered the room with them still on. Proceeding deeper into the room, the decor only got worse. It was pure destruction. There probably wasn't a single item in the whole room that remained in its original condition, no matter how small or large. Literally everything had been demolished. Clothes torn to confetti and tossed around the room. Broken furniture. Ripped-up books. A shattered television screen. A smashed computer. The filthy, stained carpet. A mirror cracked from the center in an outward wave. An overturned wastebasket. Shards of lightbulbs scattered across the floor. A hamster torn limb from

limb. A pillow with the insides on the outside. Vegetables torn to ruin, to the point that they lost all meaning. An overturned refrigerator. The air conditioner with a giant dent in the middle. A tea table scrawled with disturbing graffiti. A cracked fish tank and nearby dead tropical fish. Writing utensils split in two without a single usable one remaining. A clock that no longer worked. A shredded-up calendar. A strangled teddy bear.

And.

"What are you doing?"

Her, crouched by the window, staring this way with cursing eyes.

Without a doubt, the most broken thing in this room was none other than her.

"Muimi-chan."

No reply.

Only that dreadful gaze, piercing through me like a dagger.

Her hair, that long, brown *sauvage*, had been diced up into something hideous.

Looking a little closer I saw that remnants of that hair were strewn around the room. I never believed that hair was a girl's life, as they say, but there was something terrifying about this all the same.

This was completely her domain. A barrier barely maintaining balance, threatening to break down any minute.

There were curses in the air, and all of them were directed towards me. Muimi-chan's death glare wasn't the only thing piercing through me. Everything in this thoroughly destroyed room was sending ill will, enmity, hostility, and malice directly at me.

It felt like the world itself had become my enemy.

"You know, I'd appreciate if you didn't glare at me like that."

"Shut up," she said in a deep voice. "Why did you come here? How dare you?"

"Relax. I'm not here to save you or anything. I'm not that good a guy, and I'm no protagonist."

I used my right foot to clear a path in the debris on the floor and sat down across from Muimi-chan. I noticed her destroyed cell phone on the floor next to me.

"Aha. I see. So that's why Sasaki-san couldn't get a hold of you. She might come here directly at some point. I guess you can't just sit around here."

"Why did you come here?"

"Basically I've already figured it out," I said with deliberate plainness. Of course there was the fact that it wouldn't have been very wise to upset her emotions at a time like this, but this was also just about the only voice I could muster in my current state. "I guess you could say my imagination did most of the work. But there are some things I still can't figure out no matter how I think about them. I wonder if you'd be willing to tell me."

". . ."

"I'll take your silence as a yes." I paused for a moment. "I've got things figured out as far as the part where you attacked me. But why did you kill Akiharu-kun? That's what I don't understand. There was no reason for you to kill him."

"Ha. Hahahahahahaha," she suddenly started cackling maniacally. It was the most expressionless laughter I'd ever heard. Heartless. It was nothing more than a conveyance of her insanity. She shot me another glare. "Look at those wounds."

"You must be *stupid* setting foot in here with wounds like those. Nobody's gonna come to your rescue here. Or is your knight in shining armor waiting outside the room?"

"No, nothing like that. That guy's showing up the other night was just a coincidence to begin with. Don't worry about him," I said, recalling the precious night's events. I touched my thumb and the gauze on my face. Of course my shoulders and jaw were still far from fully recovered. I was in no state to be meeting someone face-to-face.

"At first I wasn't sure enough to come to a conclusion on the subject. That person in black was wearing a knit ski mask, so they couldn't have had long hair. So I thought it must not be you, but now that I see you've cut your hair, I'm convinced. I don't suppose that was why you cut it, was it?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

Figures. I shrugged.

"You're just a more cautious guy than I expected. You cover your tracks. And I couldn't attack you in your apartment because it's such a run-down dump with paper-thin walls."

"Ahh. The perfect environment, huh?"

I tried my best to imitate Aikawa-san's cynical tone, but I couldn't really pull it off.

"But using Mikoko-chan's name to lure me out was a big no-no. Not a very clean method."

"Don't you ever say that name." She shot me the devil's glare. "You have no right."

"Hey, thanks."

"I don't want to talk to you, but I'll ask you one thing. Why'd you reject Mikoko?"

"I wasn't really rejecting her . . ."

"Why!?" She slammed her arm into the wall as hard as she could. The entire room shook under the impact of that merciless fist. I sensed no concern on her behalf regarding the well-being of my body. It wasn't like she had hit *me*, but it sent a shiver up my back.

Even the homicidal monster was more pleasant company than this destructor.

"Why? Why couldn't you reciprocate her emotions? It's not like it was a lot to ask. Why couldn't you do something that simple? Why was that the only thing you couldn't do?"

"I asked my question fist. I'd like an answer. I'll ask again, as many times as it takes. Why'd you kill Akiharu-kun? There was no reason for that. Everything else is clear, but that one thing is still completely hazy. I said this before, but I know why you attacked me. You had your reasons. I can understand that. But why did you go kill Akiharu-kun from there?"

"If I answer, you'll answer my question?"

"I promise."

Even then, she continued glaring at me for a while.

Several minutes later . . .

"It's simple," she said. "It felt like the natural thing to do."

"Natural, huh?" I said as I tried to read her expression. "But Akiharu-kun was your friend, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he was a friend. I liked him. Just not to the point that I would never strangle him to death."

There wasn't a single hint of a lie in her words or in her gestures.

"Being friends is no reason not to kill someone. It's just a simple matter of order of priorities." She spoke honestly, from the heart.

I narrowed my eyes at her, but gave a slow nod. Priorities. Friends. Order. Friends. I chewed on each of her words for a while in my head. I searched for the right words with which to respond.

"Or do you mean to tell me you would absolutely never kill a friend? No matter what the reason, you would never do it?"

"Anybody I might kill, I don't consider a friend."

"Well, that's just fucking splendid," she scoffed. "What a hypocrite. Why couldn't you have shared a little bit of that phony virtue with Mikoko? It's your turn to answer."

I repeated what I wanted to say three times in my head before putting it to my lips.

"Probably because I didn't like her."

I thought she was sure to lunge at me and start pummeling me, but she didn't even move. She just sat and glared at me.

"Oh," she said softly. "I guess you're not just some clueless jerk. You're downright cruel."

"And if I am?"

"I told you before, didn't I? I'm certain I told you. If you hurt Mikoko-chan, I'll never forgive you."

I narrowed my eyes at her as she seemed ready to explode any minute. I gave another shrug. "So what about you, then? I can't comprehend it. I understand the philosophy behind your actions, but I don't know if you can say it was really for Mikoko-chan's sake."

"I told you not to say that name. Don't talk about Mikoko like you know her! You don't know shit!" Muimi-chan said. "*I* know her. I know everything about her. We've been together since elementary school. I know her better than I know

myself. If there's one thing I don't know, it's how she fell for a cruel bastard like you."

"That's simple," I responded without hesitation. Having already figured it out, it seemed all too obvious to me. "It was a misconception. An illusion. A deception. A simple error. A miscalculation. An assumption. Just some darling young girl in love with being in love. She probably just wasn't a very good judge of character."

"Are you done?"

Her rage was already beyond disguising. She was ready to detonate any time now. This was probably about as far as we'd get with just words.

"Actually no, there's one more thing. It's a promise I made to Mikoko-chan, so I'd better uphold to it, Muimi-chan."

My final question.

Can you forgive you own—

"Can you forgive your own existence as a murderer?"

"What's to forgive?!" She had cracked at last. "I haven't done anything wrong! Nothing! There's nothing wrong with what I did for Mikokodel! I'm the one who cares about her the most! I'm not looking for criticism from someone like *you*! It was all for Mikokodel! I'll do anything for her! I would kill or die without a second thought!"

For justice. For faith. For truth.

To save another. For the sake of a friend.

She killed.

"I cared about Mikoko-chan, unlike you! You don't care about anyone, you don't consider anyone else, you just go on living without a care in the world, don't you?! You can't do a single thing for anyone! You're just damaged goods! You don't

have a single human emotion inside of you! So you shut your goddamn mouth!"

Because it was for somebody else's sake.

Without hesitation, without deliberation.

Without a hint of uncertainty.

Without even regretting it.

Without ever feeling shame or reflecting on her actions.

She killed.

"If only you hadn't showed up! Then Tomoe and Mikoko and Akiharu and I would still all be living happily! If it weren't for you! We all got along so well! Since elementary school and high school, and even in college! As soon as you appeared we all went to shit!"

Because they were an annoyance.

Because they got in the way. Because they were a hassle. Because they were bothersome.

Because they irritate. Because they're unstable. Because they're revolting.

She killed.

"It was all for Mikoko! She's mine, and I'm hers! We're best friends! I would kill my own parents for her, and she would kill even *you* for me!"

Because it was for someone important.

She would kill anyone.

She would kill any number of people.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Herself or anyone else.

Even a best friend.

"I'm not wrong! I'm right! That's why I'll do it again and again! Even if I could go back in time, I would do the same things over again! Mikoko forgives me!"

With no excessive force.

Without going further than intended.

As simply as taking a breath.

Like a prowler and like a monster.

Like damaged goods and like a human failure.

She killed.

"I . . . I forgive myself!" She screamed as she stomped a foot down on the debris-ridden floor.

"Huh."

As I watched her, my eyes were no doubt extremely calm.

"Are you done?"

She shot me a glare. I didn't care.

"That's enough, then. Please, shut up. Your voice is offensive to the ears and your presence offensive to the eyes. So you do whatever you want to do and say whatever you want to say. Great. Does that satisfy you? You're completely broken. Ruined."

"Ruined? Me?"

"Exactly what have you done for Mikoko-chan's sake? You're just putting the blame on her, aren't you?"

"Like you know a damned thing."

I could see that she was struggling to stop herself from lunging forward. If I hadn't brought up Mikoko's name, surely she would have.

Right now, Aoii Mikoko was the only thing keeping Muimi-chan together.

"Well . . ." she said in a low voice like a growl from the depths of Hell. "What about *you*?! You don't feel the least bit responsible for her death?! Answer me!"

"No, I don't. Not at all. Those who die just die."

". . . ."

I could see her turning pale. Her mind was already past the point of enraged. Nevertheless, I made no attempt to cut my speech short. I just continued on, spouting words like a machine.

"I'm not so arrogant that I'd attempt to interfere with people's lives. People should take responsibility for their own actions. You're no exception."

"What's your problem? How can you think like that? How can you have such a disgusting outlook? You're nuts. You're not human."

"I just don't approve of people clinging to others to the point that they swallow them up. I'm annoyed by people who live life saying 'Oh, I did it for this person, I did it for this person, like that's supposed to grant them full pardon for whatever they do."

It was like I was looking at myself. "I once said you and Tomoe were similar, but allow me to correct myself," Muimi-chan said as if cursing the devil himself. "Tomoe was the embodiment of an inferiority complex, keeping herself distant from everyone, but you . . . you're just plain hostile."

"Hahh . . ." I let out a deliberate sigh. I couldn't argue with her, nor did I feel like doing so. What I wanted to do was say, "You *just* realized that?" Things that are similar but not the same are, in the end, different. It was as simple as that.

"Well, whatever. Do what you want. We're just two people with nothing to do with each other. I don't have any interest in getting your way, but . . . killing Akiharu-kun was a bad move, Muimi-chan. They'll be coming to arrest you soon enough. I doubt that's what Mikoko-chan wanted."

"I couldn't care less about the law. So I'll be arrested. I bet I will. But there's still some time before that. Plenty of time to make you suffer. To *kill* you."

Muimi-chan got onto one knee, putting herself at eye level with me. A knife she had apparently been pointing at me for some time now reflected a ray of light and caught my eye. It was the very knife the attacker in black had used that night. The one that had grazed past my carotid artery.

"Nothing's gonna get in the way this time."

"What's going to happen when you kill me?"

"Like I care. Talk all you want, but the time has come to take responsibility for hurting Mikoko."

". . . . ."

Oh. I get it.

So even you've missed the point here. You've been going on and on about how you did it all for Mikoko-chan, it was all for Mikoko-chan, it was all for Mikoko-chan, but that's just an excuse. A plea. An attempt to defend yourself.

Your actions are spurred by simple jealousy toward me, ordinary remorse for what happened to Mikoko-chan, and your own boring sense of guilt. That's all.

"Your nonsense is good, Muimi-chan," I said without even giving heed to the knife in her hand. "So are we going to pick up where we left off last time? You're going to beat me and beat me and hurt me and hurt me and make me experience pain and suffering, and then kill me off?"

"That's right."

"You don't say."

I clutched my right index finger in my left hand.

"So, for example, you might break my fingers, like this?" I forced the finger backward, snapping the bone.

There was a sound like a tree branch snapping off.

Muimi-chan's face froze in shock.

An overwhelming, maddening pain ran through my hand, but I didn't even flinch as I flashed my broken finger in Muimi-chan's face.

"Satisified?"

I had nothing to say that.

"You're not, are you? Why would you be satisfied with that? That's not nearly enough to cheer you up. You've hated me and hated me and hated me, so there's no way you're satisfied yet. Because if it's for Mikoko-chan, morals, laws, and common sense don't mean a thing."

"*Rrr. Rrrr.*"

She trembled.

It was the first time I had ever seen her shaking from emotion.

I didn't care about this either.

"I guess the middle finger is next?" I said, clutching my middle finger.

It was as if I were a doll.

That's why I had no nerves.

That's why I had no heart.

That's why I could just snap my own bones.

Crack.

"Ring finger next?"

I bent my ring finger the wrong way.

Pop.

"And finally, the pinky?"

I twisted my pinky around in an impossible direction.

Crack.

"Well, my right hand's completely destroyed. I won't be able to defend myself very well now either."

"Ah . . . ah . . . ah." The blood was rushing to her face. This wasn't just fear, but panic. The fundamental sense of horrified anxiety one feels toward something beyond his or her own comprehension. This was a fatal wound of an emotion, far more gripping than anger.

"Shall we continue to the left hand?"

I pointed the four fingers on my left hand toward the floor. From there, I threw all of my body's weight onto my left arm.

Crack crack crack crack.

It was a satisfying quartet of sounds.

"Why don't we twist 'em around a bit more?"

Crunch. Crunch crunch crunch.

"Now let's see if I can still applaud things—"

"Wh . . . what the hell are you doing?!" she screamed. Tossing the knife aside, she grabbed my wrist. "You . . . you're crazy! What is this?! What are you doing?!"

"I was just saving you the trouble of doing what you were going to do anyway. It's no different than if you have done it yourself. Or, by your logic, if Mikoko-chan had done it herself. Right?"

I held my hideously gnarled fingers up before Muimi-chan's eyes. She reflexively looked away, suggesting that even in her current mental state, she couldn't bear to look at something so disturbing.

"D . . . doesn't that hurt?!"

"Meh," I said casually. "No big deal. Not to me, anyway. No matter how much I get tortured or beaten, I don't feel a thing. You could even kill me if you wanted. Do whatever. But to me, death would be nothing more than a release."

"What are you—"

"I'm so damn sick of everything. Of living, of the people around me, the people *not* around me, all of the various intentions that make up this world and all the ones that *don't*, of you, of Mikoko-chan, and of course of myself. It's all just a damned headache. I'm the one who's disgusted here. Living only brings pain. I see no value in this place. Frankly, I don't give a rat's ass if the world gets wiped out tomorrow or if I'm wiped out today. In fact, I'd be *glad*. So killing me would be pointless. I wouldn't have minded of you killed me the other night, either."

_____ . . . . !

"Still, I'm sure killing me will put your mind at ease. But it won't amount to revenge or justice or loyalty to a friend. It's just self-relief. Nothing more than a distraction from the truth. You'll cheer up, but that's all. Causing me pain will clear away your jealousy, making me suffer will help you forget your remorse, and killing me will wipe away your guilt, but that's all you'll be doing."

"You're wrong!" She clutched her head and shook it back and forth like a madwoman. "You're wrong! You're wrong! You're wrong! Don't turn this around! You're so full of shit! I did everything for her, and y—"

"Well then, go ahead and kill me. Kill me with your own hands. The world will just go on."

Just for yourself.

Without saying it's for anyone else.

No excuses, no pleas, no defenses.

Just kill me by your own will.

Commit your profitless crime.

"*Rrrrrrrrr* . . . *a*aa*aa*aahaahhhhh!"

She picked up the knife. With a spiteful, demonic glare, she chewed down on her lip as if choking back a curse, and grabbed me by the neck, With her other hand, she dug the edge of the blade one layer of skin deep into my neck, right along that carotid artery.

And she hesitated and waited and deliberated and contemplated.

"*Rrrrrrrrrrrr!*"

And she stayed that way.

. . . . .

I closed my eyes and left it up to time.

But I soon got tired of this as well.

"I wonder what went wrong," I said, casually brushing her hand aside and distancing myself from the knife. I stood up and watched Muimi-chan huddled on the floor groaning for awhile, then gave my back a good stretch.

"When did people stop being able to do things just for themselves, Muimi-chan?"

It was always out of some sense of duty or sense of justice.

Out of some feeling of fellowship or friendship.

"Don't you think it's all just nonsense?"

Muimi-chan gave no reply. I wasn't sure if I should have been asking the question in the first place. I hadn't done anything for anyone else, much less for myself. I had never done anything for anyone.

"So what?" Muimi-chan said, as if looking for some savior. "What could I possibly do for Mikoko? What should I have done for her? What should I do?"

Don't ask me that.

That just leads to a dead end.

Thinking you can do something for others is nothing more than a happy delusion. But once you realize it's only a delusion, as you have now, there's no place left to go. Just like Tomo-chan and I, you've got no place left to go. What's ahead of you now isn't even despair, but a pitch-black void.

It's a dead end.

But I had no intention of telling her things we both already knew. Even if she didn't know, I wasn't about to go out of my way to tell her.

"To be honest," I said, turning my back to her, "I came here hoping you'd kill me. I could have you do that. You wanted to kill me and I wanted to be killed. Seemed like a match made in Heaven. So I thought I'd come get it over with already. But I've changed my mind. I won't be killed by someone like you."

"Then . . ." she said, staring at the floor. I turned toward the entrance of the room in order to avoid eye contact.

Like a stressed-out strand of yarn torn to shreds, she choked out a sentence muddled together with tears and weeping.

"Then kill me now."

"Not my business. Die yourself," I replied, and didn't look back. I had no desire to.

2

"Yo. Is it over?"

As I exited Muimi-chan's apartment, Zerozaki, leaning against a telephone pole, waved a hand and called out to me. I kept walking oast him without stopping.

"Yeah, it's over," I said.

"I'll be damned," he said, catching up to me and matching his pace to mine. "Whoa! What the hell happened to your hands?! Am I crazy, or did the number of broken bones multiply by nine?"

"Yup, it did."

"She broke them? Holy cow, man, Atemiya's like that Nenbutsu no Tetsu guy! That's some risky business."

"Nah, I broke them myself. All of them."

"Are you crazy? Come to think of it, you did say you were the one who broke your thumb, too, huh? Are you a masochist? Are you a freaking masochist? Doesn't that hurt? Do you not feel pain? Have you had a lobotomy?"

"It hurts like shit. It hurts so much I can't even faint. I might cry. I'm actually headed for the hospital right now. We're near Nishijin Hospital, right? . . . I'm not really a masochist, no. The situation just called for a little shock treatment, that's all."

"You know, broken bones don't always go back to normal. You may never play baseball again."

"No worries. If it comes to that, I'll just play soccer."

"You've got to be kidding me," he said in awe. "So how'd it go?"

"Well, now it's just a matter of sweeping up the mess. That's Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san's field. I'm sure they'll be thorough about it. Muimi-chan will be arrested, all the facts come to light, and that'll be that."

That is, if Muimi-chan maintained her sanity for that long.

That is, if she was even still alive.

Zerozaki folded his hands behinds his head with a disappointed expression. "Aw, man. That's not dramatic at all. Couldn't it at least have been a little romantic?" he said.

"What can you do? This is reality."

"Mmm. I guess. Say, man. Do you have parents and stuff?"

Zerozaki had suddenly posed a completely unrelated question, but I had a feeling he would ask something like that, so I wasn't surprised.

"Yeah, I do. In Kobe. I think they're still alive and kicking."

"Huh. So are you grateful to them and stuff?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, how do you feel toward them?"

"About what?"

"About bringing you into this world, dammit."

"What about you, Zerozaki? I guess I probably don't even have to ask, do I?"

"Answer should be obvious."

"Yeah, it is."

For an instant, we shared a glance.

"I'm sorry . . ."

"For being born."

"Huh. I guess it was not Akutagawa after all," Zerozaki laughed.

"I like Mushanokôji best." I didn't laugh.

"How do you feel about Kikuchi Kan? I'm kind of a big fan."

"I don't read him. In fact, I don't really like reading."

"Oh yeah, you said that, didn't you? . . . Huh." For some reason, he gave a convinced nod. "By the way, how's about giving me my knife back? I don't have a whole lot of that type."

"Oh, this thing? Listen, Zerozaki. I don't suppose you'd be willing to give this to me, huh? It's really handy. You can just unlock doors without using anything high-tech."

"Those things are expensive, jerk. Can you pay me one million five hundred thousand yen right now?"

"Geez, why's a little steak knife like this so expensive?"

"Cram it. So what's it gonna be?"

"How about I pay you one hundred and fifty in annual installments?"

"You know, we probably won't actually meet again."

"Ah, right."

With no other alternative, I reluctantly gave him back the knife. He took it by the handle, spun it around, and closed it back inside his vest. Evidently he had knives placed all over his body. I wonder what would happen if he ever fell.

"Well, maybe it doesn't matter, but there's still some things that bother me. How's about answering a few questions?" Zerozaki said.

"Sure. What?"

"It seems to me that when Emoto and that Aoii chick were killed, Atemiya had a solid alibi both times. She was at karaoke the first time and with her the sister the second time. Isn't that right? I don't know about Usami and you, but how could she have killed those two girls? And it seems like you realized Atemiya was the killer as soon as that detective called about Usami being killed. And you already seemed to know she was the one who attacked you in Kamogawa Park, too. How the hell did you know it was her? When did you realize that?"

"Hmm. It's kind of hard to explain."

Zerozaki scratched his head at me. "What do you mean? Like it was just intuition or something? Oh, or was it because all the other people involved were dead, so it had to be Atemiya by default? Who are you, Kindaichi?"

"No. But do I have to explain? I might get argumentative."

"Hey. I don't mind. Come on, you made me tell you all about my prowling exploits. Whatever happened to give and take? Come on, leave me with a good memory."

"What are you, dying?"

"I might. Some red creature's been chasing after me."

Indeed, it was entirely plausible. It was even possible that Aikawa-san would appear before us right this instant. Considering the facts, Zerozaki's life was like a candlelight flickering in the wind right about now.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. . . . Okay, so how far back should I go?" I said.

"From the beginning, of course. How'd you know Atemiya was the one who killed Emoto, Aoii, and Usami, and attacked you?"

"See, there's your first mistake," I said. "Muimi-chan didn't kill Tomo-chan or Mikoko-chan. She had alibis, so that should be obvious."

"Wha?" he said, his jaw dropping.

"She killed Akiharu-kun. And she assaulted me. That's all she did. Oh yeah, and I don't suppose she'll be getting her apartment deposit back, but that's it."

"Hold on," he said, spinning around in front of me and grabbing me by the shoulders. He was grinning, but not smiling. "Just a few hours ago, you were going on and on with all that confidence and that matter-of-fact tone about how 'she killed Emoto Tomoe,' and 'she killed Aoii Mikoko,' and 'she attacked me in Kamogawa park,' and 'she killed Usami Akiharu,' and 'it was obviously Atemiya Muimi,' *were you not*?!"

"Indeed," I answered plainly. "But you see, the thing about that is I was just telling a confident, matter-of-fact lie. Time was of the essence, so I just kind of glossed over the facts. It's actually a little more complicated than that."

"Hang on. So what the hell have I been doing for the past few hours, wondering, 'How in the world did Atemiya manage to kill those two? What a puzzling brain-teaser!'?"

"I told you. I'm a liar."

"I'm going to kill you," he muttered sinisterly, and returned to my side. I took a step away from him. "Err, all right. Let me rephrase the question, then. So who did kill Emoto? If it wasn't Atemiya, who was it?"

"Aoii Mikoko." I answered with her name alone. Zerozaki wasn't surprised to the point of vocalizing it. Perhaps he'd half been expecting it. But he furrowed his brow at me, crinkling his facial tattoo.

"So then who killed Aoii Mikoko? Don't tell me you're the punch line. . . ."

"Nope. That was just a suicide."

"Suicide?" This time he was clearly surprised. "Aoii killed herself?"

"Yup. That explains why nobody showed up on the surveillance cameras, right? Of course it does; there was no 'killer.' Anyway, so Mikoko-chan committed suicide, which made Muimi-chan go bananas and kill Akiharu-kun and try to kill me. But I didn't want to be killed, so I broke my hand instead. There you have it. QED."

"You're using that phrase wrong," he retorted, then clutched his head in thought. "Hang on, hang on. Explain this to me step-by-step. You can't just give me a big, crazy summary like that up front."

"Fine, I'll explain it right. Errr, okay, so you understand that Mikoko-chan killed Tomo-chan, right? Okay so far?"

"Yeah. No, wait, not okay. Aren't *you* the one who vouched for Aoii's alibi? Or your neighbor, rather? Don't tell me you and Aoii were in cahoots."

"No. Why are you so suspicious of me? What happened was I was thoroughly tricked that night, and only that night. Miiko-san too. Well, she wasn't tricked, exactly, she just didn't notice."

"What are you talking about?"

"Try thinking about it yourself. Tomo-chan was killed by Mikoko-chan. If you know that, there are only so many possibilities."

"Ahh," he said ponderously. "So you left Emoto's apartment together, right? Then you got a call from Emoto when you were around Nishiôji Nakadachiuri. You walked back to your apartment together, and then you left her with your neighbor, Asano-san. Then the next morning Aoii woke up early, went to your room, then went to Emoto's place. . . . Oh, is that it? When she was supposedly 'discovering' Emoto's body, she was actually killing her?"

"Not likely. That conflicts with the established time of death. So it must have been at night."

"So she snuck out of Asano-san's apartment?"

"Couldn't be. Miiko-san is highly sensitive to noise. She would've been caught. And Miiko-san had no reason to cover for Mikoko-chan."

"Then what was it, some kind of remote-control trick? Then again, this was a strangling, not some sealed-room mystery."

"So there's only one possible answer left," I said.

"What? Does it have something to do with that '*x* over *y*' thing?"

"Nope. You don't need to worry about that. It's like a side order of fries. Just set it aside."

"Come one, just tell me already. You sure know how to beat around the bush."

"It's simple. There was no point at which Mikoko-chan could have interacted with Tomo-chan once we left her apartment. Which means she must have killed her before we left."

"Huh? What does that mean?" Zerozaki said. "If that's the case then all pretenses all crumble. Emoto was killed between the time she called you and three a.m., right?"

"Suppose," I said, "that that call hadn't occurred. Then couldn't Mikoko-chan have killed her?"

"No, it's still impossible. You left the apartment together."

"Aha. We left together, but not at the exact same time. There was a slight lag. I mean incredibly slight. But I left the room before Mikoko-chan did. As I was leaving, I had to put on my shoes, right? At that time, naturally I wasn't facing the inside of the room. In other words, I wasn't facing Mikoko-chan and Tomo-chan's direction. I was looking at my shoelaces." I raised a foot to show him. "What's more, there was a door between the hallway and main room. I couldn't see what they were doing in there."

"Wait a minute. There must have been a scream or some kind of noise. Even if it was happening behind you, there's no way you wouldn't have noticed someone being killed."

"If it was a stabbing or a beating, maybe. But a person can't scream when they're being strangled. There were noises, but I never would've guessed it was the sound of someone being killed. I thought Mikoko-chan had tripped or something."

"Ahh." Zerozaki began rubbing his temples. If you tried hard enough, you could see a slight resemblance to Nose Keiko. But you had to really try.

"Wait. It doesn't take you ten to twenty minutes just to tie your shoes, does it? Supposing what you're saying is true, even if Aoii did strangle Emoto, she wouldn't have died that fast. People can live for up to ten minutes without breathing."

"Zerozaki, could it be that you're just misunderstanding the situation because you're a knife expert? Strangle victims don't all necessarily die from suffocation. They can also die from lack of blood flow to the brain. You just have to pull upward, like this. If you manage to cut off the carotid artery, it takes less than a minute. If you're good, it only takes a couple dozen seconds."

"Really?"

"Really. So after that, Mikoko-chan opened the door, looking completely innocent, and came out into the entrance. At that time, she was blocking my view inside, so I couldn't see anything. Then we left Tomo-chan's room together and exited the building."

"Yeah, that all adds up . . ." he said, still seeming dissatisfied. "But that's all assuming you hadn't gotten that phone call, right? But in reality, Emoto did call you. That means she was still alive after you left the building. Don't tell me she came back to life for an instant."

"You keep making nonsensical predictions. Of course that's not it. Tomo-chan died instantly. It's simpler than that. Really simple. If you just think about it, you'll figure it out. The call was for me, but it wasn't on my phone, right?"

"Right . . . it was Aoii's, wasn't it? But wasn't that because she didn't know your number?"

"Well, let's go back to the basics for a second here. What is the advantage of a cell phone to begin with? It's that it lets you make a call from *anywhere*, is it not? That call didn't necessarily come from Tomo-chan's apartment. And on top of that, phones don't let you see the caller's face, right?"

"So you're saying Aoii had an accomplice? And the accomplice used Emoto's phone to pose as her?"

"No, there wasn't an accomplice. I'm pretty sure this was a spontaneous crime to begin with. The murder weapon seems to indicate that as well."

"You mean the thin cloth?"

"Yeah. Most likely, it was the ribbon from the present Akiharu-kun gave to Tomo-chan. A ribbon would be fairly well cut out for strangling someone. It's flexible and fits to your skin. It works even better than rope. But anyway, considering the murder weapon was just something that happened to be there, not something that had be prepared, it's hard to think this was a premeditated crime."

"Then who made that phone call?"

"Mikoko-chan didn't need an accomplice. She placed the call herself," I said. "She just had to have Tomo-chan's phone in her pocket, and then call her own phone on speed dial. Of course there was nobody talking on the other end, but she just pretended it was a call from Tomo-chan. And then she passed the phone to me."

"But when you were on the phone, didn't you speak with somebody? Wasn't she trying to tell you something she had forgotten?"

"Yeah, but that *was* Mikoko-chan. At that time, I was walking a step ahead of her. It was the same thing that happened at the apartment. I didn't realize that Mikoko-chan was

right behind me whispering into Tomo-chan's phone. By the time I turned back around, she had already slipped it back into her pocket."

The method of murder and the method of creating an alibi. Both had been extremely risky, without question. If I had just turned my head around on a whim, the whole jig would've been up. But if you thought about it, the chances of that happening were fairly low. The risk was big, but the chance of success was extremely high. If you weighed things in terms of value, it was certainly a risk worth taking.

"Anyway, so that gave her an alibi. Then the next day, she went to Tomo-chan's place, returned the phone, and called the police. Usually they say you shouldn't trust the one who discovers the body first, but she already had an alibi, and she had probably hidden the murder weapon in her own apartment or something before going back to Tomo-chan's."

Of course, Mikoko-chan was the only one who knew all of the minute details, so you'd have to pay her a visit to get the full story. And that sure wasn't happening. But that was the basic gist of it. I might not have had every single fact right, but it all sounded more or less reasonable.

Mikoko-chan had probably written that "*x* over *y*" formula down at the time she "discovered" the body. The previous night, she had neither the time nor the notion to do such a thing.

"Well, that definitely makes Aoii sound like the killer. But it's still just a possibility, right? I mean, you don't have any proof, do you?"

"Well, no. That's true. Strictly speaking, there's no proof. To be sure, it could've just been some burglar."

"There must be something. Some sort of peculiarity or something."

"At any rate, that explains the Tomo-chan incident. Got any other questions?"

"Yeah," Zerozaki said with a frustrated expression. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't find the right words. "Nah, forget it," he said. "Okay, then on to the Aoii incident. Why was it a suicide? Even the police said they thought it was a homicide, right?"

"Well, that gets to be kind of a long story, but her motive for suicide should be obvious, right? After she killed Tomo-chan, her conscience got the best of her."

"Murderers have a conscience?"

"Not everyone's like *you*, you know," I said jokingly. "That's what was written in her suicide note, anyway."

"Ah. I guess if it was in her suicide note, that pretty much settles it. It at least proves that Aoii chose death on her own. I sure don't understand it though. Suicide, that is. I guess there are all sorts of killers in this world. But if she was going to do that, she should've just not killed Emoto in the first place. . . . Hey wait, hold on a sec"

"Huh? What?"

"What do you mean, 'suicide note'?"

"In other words, an essay of sorts that one writes before committing suicide in order to leave something behind in this world. Not to be confused with the will and testament."

"Thank you, Detective Columbo," he said, simultaneously kicking me in the hand. Naturally, this was excruciatingly painful since all of my fingers were broken.

"What're you doing? What if my bones don't set properly now?"

"Play soccer. So what's up with this suicide note? This is the first I've heard of it."

"Yeah. You see, before that. . . well, think about it. Didn't it seem strange in the first place?"

"Didn't *what* seem strange?"

"What do you think?"

It was the very thing Sasaki-san had pointed out.

"Look at me."

Me, a loser of a human being who had broken long ago. Who didn't have a single nerve remaining intact. Who desired death more than anything else.

"Do you really think I would get so sick just from seeing the strangled corpse of somebody I knew?"

"Ah. So you mean, you felt so sick because it wasn't a murder, but a suicide?"

"No. A corpse is a corpse, whether it was a suicide or homicide."

He said nothing.

"When I arrived at Mikoko-chan's place, I pushed the button on the intercom. There was no reply. Realizing, based on various experiences, that this was probably a bad sign, I hurried into her room. And what did I see? The dead body of Mikoko-chan, who had strangled *herself*, lying on the bed."

Strangled to death.

This was why Tomo-chan had been strangled from behind and Mikoko-chan from the front.

"She strangled herself? Is that even possible?"

"It's actually a fairly common suicide method. Of course, in Mikoko-chan's case, it wasn't her arteries that were cut off, it was her windpipe. It's an extremely agonizing way to go. Your face gets all bloated with blood. It ain't pretty."

You had to be pretty damned determined to choose a death like that.

As for Aoii Mikoko's determination . . .

"So by the bed there was a suicide note. Addressed to me. It had a lot to say. It talked about how she had killed Tomo-chan, and what she wanted me to do from there."

"What she wanted you to do?"

"She didn't want people to think it was a suicide. She didn't mind dying, but she didn't want people to think she was the horrible person who had killed Tomo-chan."

"I'm not following you here. Say it straight, man."

"What I mean is, she asked me to get rid of all the evidence. The neckstrap she had stolen from the scene of the murder, and then of course the suicide note itself as well as the ribbon, which would have given itself away as the weapon with which she had killed both Tomo-chan and herself. And there were some other things as well."

"Ahh, I get it." Zerozaki slowly nodded and looked up at the sky. "Yeah, it's starting to click. So you did what she asked. Come to think of it, something did seem strange. I noticed it myself. Something about the time was off. You left your place at eleven o'clock, arrived at Aoii's place within ten minutes, the cops arrived within another ten minutes, and you arrived at the police station within yet another ten minutes, at which point it was exactly twelve o'clock. That leaves thirty minutes unaccounted for. Were you doing something during those thirty minutes?"

"Yeah. But obviously I didn't leave Mikoko-chan's room, or the surveillance camera would've caught me, and obviously I had to have reported it to the police. So what do you think I was doing?"

"And you said you were frisked as you were leaving the apartment, right? Hmm . . . then, could it be . . . oh, man . . . did you *eat* everything?"

Yup, I nodded.

Anyone could've guessed by this point.

And this was Zerozaki Hitoshiki, no less.

"You *ate* it all?"

"Yup. It was delicious," I answered casually. "People who do that are traditionally known as 'stuffers.' But that's not important. At any rate, I can't eat what I can't digest, so I had to suppress the urge to vomit as I called the police. I was planning to hold it in until I got home, but I couldn't make it, and I ended up hurling in the police station."

"You ate the goddamn evidence . . ." Zerozaki said in awe. "The ribbon, too? Do you realize you ate something that killed two people? That's *insanity*, man."

"Yeah, no doubt. I never said I was sane."

"But why did you go along with Aoii's request? You could've just ignored it, and you wouldn't have had to cross such a rickety-ass bridge, metaphorically speaking."

"Yeah, well, I guess I was brooding over some things myself. You could call it a form of redemption," I said, breaking eye contact with Zerozaki. "Anyway, that sums up the death of Aoii Mikoko. She killed herself. In reality, the story should have ended here, but . . ."

"But the incidents kept occurring, contrary to expectations, huh?"

"Yup," I sighed. "That . . . that really was a surprise."

"So what about Atemiya, then? Why'd she kill Usami?"

"Well, that has to be left up to speculation. I wasn't involved in that incident at all. But I've got a theory that seems

to hold water. It's just your regular, everyday murder case," I said. "Muimi-chan probably thought something was fishy about Mikoko-chan's death in the first place. In fact, let's assume that Mikoko-chan talked to her herself about killing Tomo-chan, and that Muimi-chan subsequently realized that Mikoko-chan's death was a suicide."

"Okay."

"So what did she do?"

For the sake of someone else.

Not for herself.

"What *could* she do for Mikoko-chan? Zerozaki, what would you have done?"

"Nothing. Aoii was already dead."

Indeed.

Even for someone who was still alive, Zerozaki wouldn't have done a thing. Nor would I. It was that simple.

"But Muimi-chan tried to do two things. The first one was revenge. The second was to protect Mikoko-chan."

"By revenge, you mean killing you? Well, I guess you kind of rejected Aoii, after all. Makes sense. Isn't that exactly what I said? That Aoii had the hots for you?"

"Don't act like a bigshot about it. Even I realized that."

"You mean you knew and you were just ignoring it? Man, then you have no right to complain about almost being killed. But what do you mean she was trying to 'protect' her? How did killing Usami add up to protecting Aoii?"

"It's just like what I did. Muimi-chan was trying to guard Mikoko-chan's honor. If a third murder occurred, nobody would suspect that the second victim—Mikoko-chan—was actually the one who had killed Tomo-chan, that she had killed a close friend."

"Okay, fair enough. But why Usami? She could've just killed anybody. She didn't have to kill her own friend."

"No. She killed him *because* he was a friend. If the third victim had been someone completely unrelated to Tomoe-chan and Mikoko-chan, the police might not even consider it a 'third incident,' so to speak. So the most likely candidate for the next victim was either Usami Akiharu or myself. And I know what you're thinking, Zerozaki. Why didn't she just kill me, then? Indeed. But I mean it when I say my apartment is ancient. There's no harder place to kill a person."

With walls that thin, even the sound of walking down the hall could be heard from the rooms. Sneaking in, having a scuffle, and killing a person in my apartment were all impossibilities.

"So Usami was the next best thing? But even if Aoii was Atemiya's close friend, Usami was a friend too, right? How could she do that?"

"I had the same doubts myself. Not to mention that Tomo-chan was Muimi-chan's friend as well. I couldn't figure out why Muimi-chan would forgive the person who had killed her. So I asked her. And this was what she said: It was a matter of 'order of priorities.' Basically what that means is that to Muimi-chan, the already deceased Mikoko-chan was worth even more than Akiharu-kun, who was still alive, or Tomo-chan, who had been Mikoko-chan's victim."

"That's terrible. Usami got screwed more than anyone."

"Maybe so."

Akiharu-kun had prophesied that he would be next, and claimed he could die happily. Just how much of the truth had he figured out? This was a mystery to me. Was it too romantic to suppose Akiharu-kun had discovered the truth in its

entirety and still let Muimi-chan kill him? If that truly was the case, then Usami Akiharu was the only respectable one in this whole series of events.

Namely, because he had fully accepted his friends for who they were.

"Say . . ." Zerozaki stood there in deep thought like a Rodin sculpture for a while, then uncrossed his arms and looked up at me. "I understand the logic and all, but I've got the same doubts I had with Aoii. This is all based on the pretense that Atemiya really did kill him, right?

"Aoii left a suicide note behind, so that's one thing. But in Atemiya's case, you've just got to be some master speculator like Kindaichi or something. You figured it all out just from that one phone call, without even seeing any evidence. Either you just figured Atemiya and you were the only ones left so it had to be her, or I don't know *what* the hell you did."

"Do you have some problem with Yokomizo?"

I couldn't help but sense some hostility in Zerozaki's numerous references to Kindaichi. Nevertheless, he simply shook his head.

"Nah, not really," he answered. "But the book jackets are always too scary so I only watch the TV dramas. I don't really like him or hate him, to be honest."

"Ah."

"So is that all it is?"

"No. Think back. Remember what I asked Sasaki-san?"

"Ah, right. Whether that '*x* over *y*' mark was there, right? And? I thought you said that wasn't important."

"The meaning of the mark is irrelevant. It was nothing more than random symbols at that point. It only meant something in the case of Tomo-chan's death. But the fact that the

same mark was found at the site of Akiharu-kun's death suggests something very odd."

"What?"

"That '*x* over *y*' mark found at each crime scene was a secret. It was known only to the police. Sasaki-san didn't even mention it at first. The only other people who could've known about it were you and me, since we broke into the crime scene, and anyone I happened to ask, 'What do you suppose *x* over *y* means?'."

Namely Aikawa-san, Mikoko-chan, and Muimi-chan.

"There must have been other people who knew about it. People working on the case and such."

"Indeed. There were plenty of people who knew. But Muimi-chan was the only one who thought it was a 'dying message.' "

"Ahh, because the police thought it was the killer's doing. And?"

"In Akiharu-kun's case, Sasaki-san reported that evidence suggested the victim had written the message himself. Why only this time? Most likely because the killer coerced her victim into writing it before killing him, in an effort to emphasize that this was the 'third incident.' "

"And she wouldn't have had that idea in the first place if she hadn't thought the mark was a dying message, huh? So Atemiya didn't know what '*x* over *y*' meant?"

"Probably not."

If she had known the mark's meaning, she probably wouldn't have used it that way.

"And that was enough for you to figure out that Atemiya was the killer?"

"Well, of course it was partially speculation. I kind of figured she seemed the most likely to do such a thing. Even I was impressed by her loyalty to Mikoko-chan."

"No you weren't," he laughed. "Man, I'm not trusting a thing you say anymore. You're not just a passive observer; you're a freaking liar."

"I believe I told you that."

"Don't flaunt your faults."

"Yeah, I know I shouldn't," I said casually. "Anyway, it looks like you don't have any other questions. Can we close the books on this case?"

"Not a very grand finale, but . . . hahhh, how do you say it? Hearing the whole story laid out like that makes it seem like such . . ."

"A masterpiece?"

"No, nonsense," he said, as if he had just heard the most disappointing joke of all time.

I felt pretty much like that myself.

It was something terribly grotesque, terribly warped, terribly vile. It was like a joke, a comical anecdote, an unsightly, unbearable figure.

In the end, there was no way to stop thinking, no matter how much you willed yourself not to. Your brain would keep thinking automatically.

Who and what were in the wrong? That was probably simple enough in and of itself. It was an issue anyone could comprehend, upon which everyone could reach a unanimous agreement, for which everyone would feel sympathy. Something close to us all.

That was what made it so unpleasant.

I don't know.

If only I could have abandoned everything. How nice that would've been.

"Well, without prying too deep," Zerozaki said, looking off the other way with utter disinterest. "I don't figure you'll give me a straight answer anyway. But . . . eh, forget it."

"What? You're awfully quick to give up."

"Well, I've got a few ideas up my sleeve, but will you tell me one thing, oh babbler of nonsense?"

"What is it, my dear homicidal monster?"

"What are your thoughts?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I mean, how do you feel about the fact that three people have just died around you?" he said, suddenly growing much more interested. He was like a little boy, happily looking at his own reflection in a mirror. "You had people killing friends, killing themselves, killing *for* their friends, *being* killed for friends, and as a bonus, you were almost killed. So how do you feel about all that?"

. . . . .

It was a straight question that I doubt I could have delivered myself.

I tried to fold my arms and make like I was thinking in order to buy some time, but my broken fingers wouldn't even allow that.

"Zerozaki, here's how I feel about this string of incidents."

"Okay, let's have it."

"I talked a little too much this time. My throat hurts almost as much as my fingers."

. . . . .

Zerozaki froze. His face twitched for an instant before he exploded into laughter.

"Gahahahahaha! I'll bet it does," he said. "In other words, you don't even care if your friends die, right?"

"No, even a guy like me undergoes some shock at the death of a friend. It's just that these people hadn't become friends yet."

Of the lot of them, I was closest with Emoto Tomoe, and surely that closeness was to blame for why she was the most distant.

I couldn't respond to Aoii Mikoko's affection with affection, and Atemiya Muimi's aggressive displays of emotion were totally foreign to me.

Likewise, Usami Akiharu's graciousness was something I lacked.

"You live a crippled life," Zerozaki said.

"Not really."

"Yes you do. You restrict yourself."

"Better than having others restrict me. What exactly do you think it means to be free, Zerozaki? Does freedom to you mean killing people?"

"Ahh, my idea of freedom, eh?" he said with a strange snicker. "Well, to be honest, I hate that damn word. I despise it. It gives me goose bumps."

"Yeah, I don't like it either."

"It's a cheap word in Japan, huh? People just throw it around in any context. They use it like an excuse. You know, like 'Don't I at least have the freedom to dye my own hair?' What a load of crap. But I pretty much just do what I want, whether you call it freedom or not. To hell with being restricted, whether it's by yourself or others."

"Fair enough." I sighed and nodded. "Then I guess if I hadn't restrained myself, I would've been like you."

"Does that mean if I *had* restrained myself, I would've been like *you*?"

How wholly unappealing.

"I think I'll pass on that."

"Yeah, that's a big no thank you."

Zerozaki laughed, and I didn't laugh.

As our pointless chatter went on, at some point the hospital appeared before us. Apparently we had been conversing at a standstill for some time now. I hadn't noticed at all. At this point, I really had been talking too much.

From there, we continued talking about things that had nothing to do with the murders. Things that had nothing to do with anything besides us. For probably two whole hours. Ridiculous things that would serve no purpose in life. Things that would bring neither help nor harm to the world.

Some topics he would bring up.

Some topics I would bring up.

If you had three wishes, what would you wish for? If you found a hundred million yen, how would you spend it? Which is more beautiful, an isosceles triangle or an equilateral? Which is bigger, a kilometer or a kilogram? Would you rather belong to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or the Rosicrucian Order? Is it possible to have a 115-by-l 15 block magic square? What the hell is Eighty-eight Othello, anyhow?

We conversed like two good friends.

But Zerozaki was no friend of mine, and I was no friend of his. We may as well have been talking to ourselves. It was all meaningless, worthless small talk. I thought it neither enjoyable nor unenjoyable. It was an act of reflection on how I'd lived these past nineteen years. A reflection of light. Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

It was a wholly inconceivable chunk of time, but sure enough, the hands of that magical clock slowly made their way to zero.

"Well, that puts my doubts to rest," he then said. "I guess this is farewell."

"Yeah." I agreed with no resistance.

"Nice killing time with ya," Zerozaki said, lifting his rear end off the banister he had been sitting on. "Say," he said, giving me a sideways glance. "You planning on staying in Kyoto permanently?"

"Hard to say. I'm kind of a wanderer, really. I reckon I'll be here as long as I'm in college, but you never know when I might drop out."

"Gotcha. Well, then what's a place you don't think you'll ever go in your whole life?"

"Hmm . . . I doubt I'll ever go to the North or South Pole, among others," I said, giving a stock answer after a moment's thought. "The one place I definitely don't want to go to is Texas in America. Especially Houston. I'd rather break every damn bone in my body than go back there."

"Huh." He nodded. "I guess I'll go there, then."

"Can you speak English?"

"I went to junior high school. Besides, a knife gets through where words don't. Of course," he said caustically, "*your* knife probably wouldn't."

I shrugged at his biting comment. "Well, I guess we won't meet again."

"Fine by me. I don't really like seeing you anyway."

"Yeah, true enough."

It was probably true. I wouldn't have any desire to see him, nor him to see me. It was nothing more than an impossible

chance meeting to begin with, so such was the logical conclusion.

In the end, I posed one final question. I pulled out the deepest, darkest fragment of my being and took a good look at it head-on.

"Tell me, Zerozaki."

"What?"

"Is there someone you love?"

"Hell no, man. Does it look like there is? Incidentally, I hate myself the most. Or maybe you. Why do you ask?"

"I've got someone."

He looked just a bit surprised, but then gave a gloating sneer. "I asked you before and you said, 'Ehh, I don't really know,' you jerkoff."

"Yeah, I was lying."

"Oh," he said. "Well, I guess that's the difference between you and me."

"Yeah, guess so."

"I guess you'd better keep on living, then. Don't become like me."

"Same to you."

He turned his back on me and began walking toward Imadegawa Street. I turned my back on him and began walking toward the hospital reception.

Neither of us said a word, but I'm sure we were thinking the same thing.

"Now then . . ."

To me, this marked the end of the story. But even if a world or two had crumbled down on the other side of the mirror, I could think of at least two people who had no intention of letting things end this way, and there was something depressing about that.

Maybe this too was a form of divine retribution.

"That's all this damn life is, eh, Human Failure?"

So muttered the "Damaged Goods."

I was speaking to myself.

Kunagisa Tomo

????

FINAL CHAPTER

A WORLD THAT CAN'T END

With all of my fingers besides the left thumb placed in braces, the doctor told me they would take about two weeks to heal to a point of not interfering with my daily life, as long as I went easy on them. The following day, I headed for Kunagisa's condominium in Shirosaki, the highest-class residential area of Kyoto. I thought it would be nice to show up looking cool on the Vespa I had inherited from Mikoko-chan, but the finger braces wouldn't allow it, so I gave up. It seemed I would have to wait a bit longer before I could enjoy that sweet feeling of going for a spin.

The braces proved to be more of an inconvenience than I had initially expected. At first, I figured, "Oh, so my fingers won't be able to bend as much for a while, big deal," but within the first night alone, I realized that this was going to place a considerable strain on my daily life. Even getting dressed had become a big chore. I realized that this was going to cause me to become even more of a burden to Miiko-san next door, and this launched the beginning of a very pessimistic phase.

And so it was that my mode of transportation this day was my own two feet. Three hours was a bit intense for someone

suffering from injuries, and I could've just as easily taken a bus or taxi, but considering the high cost of the medical bills for my finger treatment, I had decided to save my money instead.

"But she is going to be there, right?"

Muttering such things to myself all the while. I eventually arrived in front of Kunagisa's condo. It was a posh, brick building that looked more like a fortress than a condo. The thirty-first and thirty-second floors both belonged to Kunagisa.

I passed through the gazes of a number of rocklike security guards sitting firm as rocks in the entrance (they knew my face by now) and headed for the elevator lobby. The elevator was already on the first floor before I even pushed the call button.

I went ahead and pushed it, opening the doors, and went inside. I used a key to open the button case, exposing the buttons for floors thirty-one and thirty-two, and pressed the one for thirty-two.

The sensation of gravity gone awry continued for a whole minute.

I exited the elevator once it stopped and approached the steel door straight ahead of me. As vastly superior as this place was to my own, it still lacked an intercom. Kunagisa almost never received any visitors, so there was no need.

I opened the lock with a key and fingerprint scan, and entered the room.

"Tomooo, it's meee. I'm in your plaaace," I called out as I walked down the hallway (although I didn't feel right calling it just a "hallway." The staircase alone was bigger than my entire place). On the thirty-first floor below, most of the walls had been knocked down to make space for a ridiculously enormous computer, whereas the thirty-second floor was more like

a maze, making it easy for me with my poor memory to get mixed up. Now where was that girl?

I realized I should have called her ahead of time, but my fingers were in no condition to be operating a telephone. My left thumb was still functioning normally, of course, so I could have done it with enough effort, but I was in no mood to exert that effort.

"Tomo, where are you?" I continued walking down the hall as I called out again. I began to see bizarre cords and cables of various unknown varieties tangled along the floor. Of course I had set foot in this place any number of times by now, but for a guy like me who didn't know the first thing about mechanical or electronic engineering, this place was still like a magical kingdom. If I wasn't careful, I could easily trip on something and fall, so I made sure to take caution as I proceeded.

"Tomo, it's me. You're somewhere on here, right?"

"Yo, I'm over here, thisaway, thisaway."

The responding voice didn't belong to Kunagisa.

As expected, it was a red voice.

Not that voices have colors.

"Actually I thought you might not be here . . ."

Is life ever that easy?

I continued walking in the direction of the voice until at last arriving in an empty room about ten mats wide. In this disgustingly big mansion of a condo, there were rooms even Kunagisa Tomo couldn't find a use for. Of course I supposed it was also just a matter of time.

Then again, I guess you need rooms like that if you're going to have guests over.

"Yo. Long time no see."

Inside the room, Aikawa-san and . . .

"Wawawawa, it's Ii-chan!"

Kunagisa Tomo were sitting across from each other, drinking cola out of cans.

She had Hawaiian-blue hair, the small frame of a child, and a 100 percent undiluted smile. It was the first time I had seen her in awhile. Since Golden Week, in fact, so almost a whole month. But it felt like it had been ages.

It was as if I had returned to where I belonged.

Perhaps this was what they called nostalgia.

"Wawawa, Ii-chan, what happened to your hands? Is it just me, or did they get a lot fatter?"

"The skin's hardening. It's Flictonic Cliple Weber Syndrome."

"Ooh, I see."

"No you don't. Actually, there was a string of various incidents. Including my face injuries, it'll be about two weeks until I'm fully recovered."

"Hawawaa. Wowee, Ii-chan, cooool. You're dyn-o-mite, Ii-chan, yayyy. Did you have a run-in with Nenbutsu no Tetsu or something?"

"No. Let's not talk about that guy." I sat down to join them, effectively forming an isosceles triangle with myself at the peak. My eyes shifted towards the object of my fears.

"Hello, Jun-san."

"What's up, Main Character?" She grinned, cola in hand. She looked like she was up to no good, as usual. On the other hand, she seemed to be in surprisingly high spirits. But Aikawa-san's moods changed like mountain weather, so it was hard to really pass judgment on such things.

"What are you doing in Kunagisa's top secret headquarters? Come to find out more about the prowler?"

"No, no, nothing like that. The prowler thing's been settled for the time being."

"Really?"

"Yup," she nodded.

"We were just talking about that now, Ii-chan. You wanna participate too? Three heads are better than two."

"Nah, not really interested."

I was lying, though.

Still, I guessed this meant Zerozaki hadn't gone to America after all. Maybe Aikawa-san had caught up with him at the airport and put an end to things once and for all. If so, he had my condolences. He had had such a gallant departure only to follow it up with a big flop. That's just too shameful, Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

"Hey, Kunagisa-chan," Aikawa-san said. "Sorry to do this in your own house, but would you mind leaving us alone for a moment? I've got something to talk to Ii-chan about."

"Hmm?" Kunagisa said, scratching her head. "Is it a *secret* something?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm. Okay."

She stood up and tip-tapped out of the room. Most likely she would head off to some computer in another room and start working away. Unlike me, whose only way of passing time was Eight Queens, Kunagisa had a near limitless supply of methods.

Left alone with Aikawa-san, I was first to speak. "You know, I can't help but notice you just kicked Kunagisa out."

"Indeed I did. You wouldn't want her to be present when we're having a serious talk, would you?" Aikawa-san said unapologetically. "You ought to be grateful to me. Don't get so

angry. Geez, I set Tomo-chan aside for two seconds and you lose your cool."

"Then why won't we just go somewhere else to talk?"

"No can do. I'm a busy woman. Tomorrow I'm needed in Hokkaido. I'll be heading there as soon as I leave this place. To be honest, I wasn't sure I'd get to see you."

Just lucky, I guess.

"So . . ." Realizing that there was no way to talk my way out of anything with this woman, I gave up and encouraged her to begin. "So what are we talking about this time?"

"First, an update on the Zerozaki case," she said. "I'm sure you're interested to know, right? I won't let you say you're not."

"Well, as much as the next guy, I guess. But what did you mean, it's been 'settled'?"

"Last night, I finally found that little snot. We had a little round two."

"And?"

"We came to a friendly agreement," she said. "He'll stop killing people, and in return, I'll leave him alone. It's a bargain."

"Is that good enough?"

"Sure. My job was only to stop the Kyouto prowler. Nobody ever said to catch him. To be honest, I'd rather avoid getting into a killfest with the 'Zerozaki Ichizoku', so this is good enough for now. For now."

For now.

I didn't want to think about the meaning lurking within those words. This was undoubtedly a domain with which I didn't want to get involved.

"Then I guess that means that at the very least, there won't be any more prowling incidents in the city of Kyoto huh?"

"Exactly. And if it hadn't been for your cooperation, it never would've come to this conclusion, so I suppose I ought to express my gratitude," she said, sounding much like an actress.

"Reallyyoudon'tsaythat'sgreatlet'sgogetKunagisa."

"Hold it right there," she said, interrupting my attempt to weasel out of a discussion. "You know, I had a nice little chat with Hitoshiki-kun . . ."

"You did?"

"I did," she said, scooting toward me on her knees. "We talked about you, and you, and you, and you . . . you know, the usual stuff."

"That's creepy."

That bastard. What had he gone and blabbed to her about? To Aikawa-san, of all people. Then again, I did the same thing. Maybe this was what he meant about having "a few ideas up his sleeve."

"But you know," she said, looking truly impressed, "that was some smart detective work you did. Even I was taken aback. Who would've thought that Aoii Mikoko had killed Emoto Tomoe before you even left her apartment, and that her own death was a suicide? I didn't see that coming at all."

"Forgive me if this whole speech sounds staged, Jun-san."

"Don't get so serious. I have no plans to make enemies with you. I wanna be your friend, Ii-chan, really. But you know, I figure I might as well clarify things."

"What things?"

She didn't answer right away. She was silent for a while, as if trying to read my response.

"The details of this string of incidents," she eventually said.

"You mean you're not satisfied with my reasoning again?"

"No, I've got no problem with your reasoning. It's *you* I'm not satisfied with. At all."

". . . ."

"It sounds like you weaseled your way out of explaining a few things to Zerozaki, didn't you?"

"Yes, but they were all little details. Just trivial stuff, stuff you could explain however you want, or conversely that I couldn't even imagine an explanation for. So it doesn't really—"

"For example, the reason Aoii Mikoko killed Emoto Tomoe."

"Well, that's . . ."

That was something I hadn't told Zerozaki. Something I'd left unexplained.

"Or what about the reason that neckstrap was taken from the scene of the crime?"

"Well, I . . ."

"And why would an apathetic boy like you go to all the trouble of making Aoii Mikoko's suicide look like a homicide, even if it was requested in her suicide note? But what I really want to know most is, just how long did you know about everything?"

. . . .

"You made it sound like you first learned the truth upon reading Aoii Mikoko's suicide note, but . . . well, that just can't be, now can it?" she said with a grin. "So when?"

I couldn't muster an answer.

"As much as I underestimate people, I know you're pretty hot stuff," she said. "I certainly don't believe you didn't realize the truth at all until seeing that suicide note."

"You're overestimating me. I'm not that—"

"Well then, shall I provide more concrete evidence? For example, you said something to Zerozaki along the lines of 'Seeing the dead body of someone I know isn't enough to make me feel sick,' but it seems to me that that's not the only part of the story that wasn't very *you*, so to speak."

"What else is there?" I knew where she was going with this, but I posed the question anyway. "I don't have a clue what you mean."

"Go back to when you first heard the facts from Sasaki. She asked you about the phone call you got from Emoto, and what did you say? That it was *definitely* Emoto's voice. That you never forgot a voice once heard. Or something to that effect. You've brought up your terrible memory any number of times by now. So how could you be so sure?" She patted me a couple of times on the shoulder teasingly. "How could that busted memory of yours possibly confirm such a thing? You had only met the girl one time, and this was over the phone, no less. There *is* no way you could've confirmed such a thing. Don't you think that's why Aoii Mikoko thought to use such a trick in the first place? She was anticipating your lousy memory. At the very least, there's no way you could say it was 'definitely' her voice."

"And?"

"*And* that means you deliberately lied to Sasaki-san. Now why would you do a thing like that? Well, here's what I think—you can't fake something you don't know about to begin with, but you can fake something you do know about.

When Sasaki came and told you about Emoto's death, *that* was when you realized the truth about Aoii's trick and that she was the one who had killed Emoto Tomoe, wasn't it?"

The cat was essentially out of the bag. There was no point in staying silent any longer. Before the eyes of this scarlet, multitalented wonder, such a course of action was more worthless than worthlessness itself.

"I didn't really have *everything* figured out at that point," I answered relatively honestly. "I didn't have any evidence or anything at that point. It was just a guess. It was just a vague idea I had, like, 'It could have happened like this,' you know? You certainly couldn't call it a solid conclusion. But Jun-san, even supposing that were true, that I had figured everything out at that point . . . is there some problem with that?"

"Indeed there is. A freaking *huge* problem. Now, if you told me you were just lying to cover up a friend, I'd be fine with that. Anybody would tell a lie if it meant saying a friend. But the problem here is that Aoii Mikoko *wasn't* your friend. Regardless of how she felt toward you, you didn't feel anything toward her. She was just an acquaintance. A classmate. Simply put—you weren't covering for her. You were *stalling* her."

Stalling.

And for what purpose did I need that extra time?

To reach a decision.

To give, or to take?

"And then on that particular day, you pointed the finger at her. 'Can you forgive your own existence?' Or something like that."

"You talk as if you had seen it all yourself. Were you watching us, by any chance?"

Come to think of it, hadn't Aikawa-san said something about spotting Mikoko-chan and me that Saturday? But what if she had followed us after that? I may have been able to detect the deadly Zerozaki or Muimi-chan, the novice of novices, but I doubted I would've noticed if Aikawa-san had been on our tail.

And yet Aikawa-san denied it. "No, I wasn't watching you. But I can at least guess what you would've said. I share Zerozaki's opinion—I don't believe for a second that a person capable of murder would let their own conscience drive them to suicide. Anyone likely to hold regrets wouldn't commit the murder in the first place."

"But statistically speaking, a fair percentage of murderers do commit suicide."

"Statistically speaking? You've been around for nearly twenty years and statistics is the best answer you can come up with?" She raised a scoffing eyebrow and snorted at me. "Don't tell me you believe in something that idiotic. Something that only happens once in a hundred thousand tries happens on the very first try. The first person you ever meet is one in a million. The lower the probability, the more you see it happen. 'Statistics.' What a joke. There's nothing more average than a miracle."

It was a ridiculously wild view on the subject, but there was no arguing with *the* Aikawa Jun. Speaking from personal experience, she was entirely out of my league.

"But I digress. At any rate, Aoii Mikoko didn't commit suicide out of guilt. She did it because you *accused* her. Or rather, you *questioned* her. After that, she had no choice other than death."

Can you forgive your own existence?
I'll be back tomorrow. Around twelve.
You'll have your answer then.

"You mean just because I said that? If that alone was enough to activate her conscience, she wouldn't have committed the crime in the first place," I said. "And to commit suicide over a thing like that—"

"But don't you see? Aoii murdered Emoto for you."

I was speechless.

"Ehh, I guess saying it was 'for you' is going a little too far. Aoii made the decision to do it on her own, and you're not responsible for anything. Basically it came down to a matter of jealousy, if you want to put it simply."

I didn't answer.

Aikawa-san continued. "Emoto Tomoe never opened herself up to anybody, never got any closer than she absolutely had to. And yet she spoke quite candidly with you on the very first night you met."

A fatal wound. Damaged goods.

They were similar, but different.

What if Mikoko-chan had been half-awake during that conversation? What if she had been conscious at that time, just as she had been during my conversation with Miiko-san?

"If you consider the facts, it's obvious why she stole that neckstrap too. Why would Aoii need a thing like that? It was a gift from Usami Akiharu. But remember what you said about it? 'It's a good match,' or something to that effect. You, who almost never compliment anybody, went and said that. So Aoii stole it. She didn't *need* it, per se, she simply wanted to take it, and so she snatched it from the crime scene. I suppose this too was an act of jealousy. The point is, Aoii Mikoko

couldn't bear the thought that you and Emoto Tomoe were becoming close."

"So that's why she killed her? *That* was her motive? That's idiotic. Can you imagine being killed for a reason like that? That's appalling."

"You're right, it *is* appalling. And that's why you couldn't forgive her, isn't it? She tragically robbed a human being of her life for something so stupid. And so you made her take responsibility for it."

"Do you really think I would do something like that?"

"No I don't. Not if this had been some random, spontaneous act. If it was just a matter of someone having 'gone too far' I'm sure you would've just forgiven her and looked the other way. But that's not what this was. This was a premeditated crime. It wasn't the 'power of alcohol' or something like that. She even had a murder weapon prepared from the very beginning." She let out a snicker. "I know you don't really think she used a *ribbon* to do it. Apparently you told Zerozaki the murder weapon was the ribbon from Usami's gift, but obviously that wasn't the case."

"I don't know about that. It seems like it would've made a good—"

"But the neckstrap was the only thing taken from the crime scene, right? It was written down in those police documents. That means the ribbon was still there. Which means that the murder weapon had to be something else, by the pretense that the cloth used in Aoii's suicide matched the cloth used to kill Emoto. So what does that mean? It means that Aoii Mikoko had already prepared a murder weapon before even arriving at Emoto's apartment."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she made a prediction. She could detect the similarities between you and Emoto from the get-go. She sensed something about your 'aura', if you will. And if her prediction turned out to be on the mark, she was going to kill Emoto. She had planned it like that from the start. This wasn't just some gimmick that any old sucker of a college student could've thought up off the top of her head."

"That's rather laughable," I said without even cracking a smirk. "She kept going on and on about how they were such great pals, and then she killed over something as trivial as *that*. And what's worse, I know she wasn't lying about them being friends. That was no lie, Jun-san. She really did care for Tomoe-chan."

Just not to the point that she wouldn't kill her.

If she got in the way, Mikoko-chan would kill her without mercy.

Kill.

Die for me.

Truly this girl had nerves of steel.

"So you deliberated for awhile, but ultimately decided to denounce her."

"Denounce her? Just to be clear here, Jun-san . . . I didn't suggest that she kill herself. In fact, I waited until she was in a relaxed state before I even approached her about it, specifically so she wouldn't go overboard and commit suicide or something. At the very least, I left three options for her. She could kill herself, turn herself in, or just pretend she didn't know what I was talking about and never cross paths with me again. As a bonus option, she also could have killed me."

"Weren't you hoping she'd go for the bonus option?"

Yeah, right. I shrugged.

"I had expected her to choose to turn herself in . . . but she didn't. When I went into her room, she was dead. So I . . ."

"So you acted like you didn't know it was suicide. There was nothing about that written in the suicide note, was there? And you're the one who left that '*x* over *y*' mark, aren't you?"

It was true. Mikoko-chan hadn't made any such request. Swallowing everything was all my idea. The fact that she hadn't turned herself in meant she didn't want people to know what she had done. And so I decided, more or less on a whim, to help out.

And to be honest, I also felt a little responsible.

" 'Responsible', huh . . . personally, I think of that as a word people use when something comes as a complete surprise to them."

"Well, to be sure, I hadn't seen it coming. It *was* a surprise, it really was. I agree with you and Zerozaki that it's not really feasible that a person capable of murder would commit suicide out of guilt. That's why I was surprised to find that she *had* committed suicide. I'm not even sure whether or not it actually was the indigestible objects in my stomach that made me so queasy, Jun-san."

"But it wasn't necessarily guilt that pushed Aoii to suicide. It's possible that she died because you pushed her. Because of what she'd done, you were disgusted with her. She had made an enemy out of you, and in so doing, lost all hope."

"If that's the case, that just makes me even angrier. So she kills one person, and that alone distresses her to the point of *dying*? She wasn't even *qualified* to be a killer."

"Ahh, so *that's* what you meant about feeling responsible. Not for Aoii, but for Emoto . . . I see. Huh . . . an interesting concept. But say, doesn't a person's affection mean anything

to you? She may have taken it in a twisted direction, but Aoii really liked you."

"Saying 'I like you so you'd better like me' is just an intimidation tactic. Unfortunately, I'm not some blind reciprocator. People who kill to serve their own passions make me sick."

"Would you say the same thing about Atemiya?" she asked rather politely. "The thing that impresses me the most is that you were able to predict all of this, including its conclusion, from the very beginning. That's why you implanted that false idea in Atemiya's head about the 'dying message.' You explained to Zerozaki that Atemiya 'misunderstood' the meaning of those markings, but in reality, it was you who caused her to do that. That way, it would be immediately obvious that Atemiya was the culprit if the murders continued even after Aoii's death. Even when you snuck into Emoto's apartment, you weren't looking for clues; you were looking for something that nobody would know about."

"It was just a sort of insurance, I guess. It wasn't all that thoroughly calculated or anything. Don't make it sound like I had everything in the palm of my hand."

In the end, he was the one who had actually done the killing, she was the one who had done the dying, and that girl over there was the one who had committed suicide. I hadn't done a single thing. I hadn't even manipulated anybody. How *could* someone as clueless about people's emotions as me even try to manipulate someone?

Now *that* was nonsense.

"So Sasaki and Kazuhito . . . yesterday they took Atemiya Muimi into custody, but . . . they say she was on the verge of suicide. She was about to jump off the roof of her building, and they managed to rescue her just in time. Apparently she'd

completely lost it, and they couldn't even understand the words coming out of her mouth. They're not sure she'll ever be back to normal."

"Really."

"Did you say something to her?"

"No," I answered without hesitation. "Didn't I tell you? I'm not interested in people who kill to serve their own passions."

"I'm pretty sure you said they make you sick."

"You probably misheard me."

She glared at me in silence for a moment. "Hahh," she sighed. "Well, either way . . . so that's why you condemned these girls who each only killed one person, yet completely overlooked the multiple, indiscriminant, merciless killings of Zerozaki? To give or to take, huh? Gee . . . you really are cruel, huh?"

"I get that a lot."

Aikawa-san swigged down the last remaining drops of her cola, rose to her feet with a grunt, and looked down on me. "Dust to dust . . . well, whatever. When all is said and done, your crimes and your punishments are yours and yours alone. I'm not sure how you see I, but you weren't in the wrong here. If you can be faulted for anything, it's that you are who you are. You're guilty of the crime of being you, and so, too, shall that be your punishment. And I have no intention of getting in the way of that. I was just a little curious. So here's my final question," she said, sounding much more lighthearted than she had until a few moments ago. But I knew it was when she got like this that she truly shined.

"Sure. what?" I said, just a little bit nervous.

"What was really written on Aoii's suicide note?"

. . . . "Just one line," I said.

"Wow. What was it?"

"Forgot. Bad memory."

And then I remembered:

" 'I wanted you to save me.' "

"That's a pretty rough line," she said, laughing. "Still, it'll stick with you. Her confession to you would've made for a nice last memory, but that's just plain bitter. You'll never forget her for the rest of your life now. Maybe that's what she was shooting for."

"Not really. I'll have forgotten it in another three days or so."

This sounded like bitter retort itself, but I meant it in all honesty, and it would probably come true. My insides were already thoroughly saturated with bad memories. Sure, I may have gained another two or three or four crosses to haul around on my back, but they'd be buried soon enough. That was all there was to it.

"Figures," Aikawa-san said. She gazed at me for a while before her face grew cynical again. "Say . . . you didn't really care either way, did you?" she said.

. . . . In regards to what?

There were so many possibilities, I had no idea what she was referring to.

But still.

Whatever the intended question was, there was only one possible answer.

"Nah."

"Figures," Aikawa-san said. "Well, I'll see what I can do about Sasaki, see if I can get her to drop the charges on you."

"Charges? What charges?"

"Falsifying information in regards to the Emoto case, encouraging Aoii's suicide, not to mention concealment of evidence, plus withholding information and having that little rendezvous with Atemiya. Normally they'd have your ass for all that, which I'm sure you were well aware of, but I'll take care of it for you. Although I suppose even if I didn't, Kunagisa probably would. . . . You'd better start doing some favors for some people."

"Sasaki-san said something like that too."

"I'll bet. I taught her that line."

"You don't say."

Lately I'd been up to my ears in debts owed to various people for favors they'd done. And it hadn't even been a full five months since I'd returned to Japan. Would even the remainder of my life be enough time to repay everyone?

I probably didn't have much of a choice in that matter.

"Well, let's do this again," she said.

"We won't have another chance to meet, will we?"

"Oh, I think we will. I have a feeling we'll be meeting again real soon."

"I don't suppose that means you're going to show up again tomorrow to hang out, like last time. . . ."

"I told you, I'm off to Hokkaido tomorrow . . . some real sticky-sounding job. Not sure I'll make it back alive this time. I'm pretty excited."

"You don't die even if you're killed."

"You neither," she said. "Well, so long." With that, she left the guest room. It was an extremely simple farewell, like we really were going to meet again tomorrow.

And we probably would meet again at some point.

And surely she would once again forcefully expose my insides, flashing a cynicism-ridden smile all the while. And no doubt, she would put another end to another story that had already ended.

She would solve what had already been completed,

Complete what was already solved.

Because that was the role of this red contract worker.

Now *that*, *that* was some real grade A.

"Aikawa-san, you just don't know when to quit."

In an uncharacteristic moment, it occurred to me that being killed didn't sound so bad, if she was the one doing the killing.

"Now then . . ."

I stared up at the ceiling. The ceiling that looked to boast twice my height if I jumped with my arms stretched up. Spacially speaking, this room was somewhere between five and ten times the size of my lodge.

That aside.

"I think you can come out now, Kunagisa."

"Gah," leaked a voice from somewhere, but made no effort to show herself. It looked like she intended to continue playing dumb. How could someone so smart be such a knothead? Then again, it was still a lot better than being dumb *and* a knothead like me.

"If you don't some out now, you'll miss your chance. Is that okay?"

"Uni. It's hard to time these things."

As she spoke, a single plate opened in the ceiling, and her face peered out. She snickered guiltily. "Teehehehe. You knew all along?"

"Yup-yup. I think Aikawa-san noticed too."

"Aww. What's the point of this stupid secret passageway, then?"

In a display of baffling logic, she proceeded to jump down at me as if diving into a swimming pool. I might reiterate at this point that the ceiling was *twice my height when jumping and stretching*. At the same time, I couldn't just dodge out of the way, so I took the impact straight in the gut.

"Ii-chan, you okay?"

"Not so much . . ." With my fingers broken, I couldn't even guard myself. I had been reduced to a human cushion. "Tomo . . . please, get off. I think you broke some ribs."

"I believe I'll waive that suggestion." She squeezed up against me, pushing me all the way over. It was a position fairly reminiscent of the one Aikawa-san had put me in several days earlier, but this was much nicer. A heartfelt embrace, if you will.

Squeeze.

"Hee-hee. I missed you! I liked you!"

"Well, I appreciate the 'I miss you.' . . ."

She was pure innocence.

She had heard everything I had just discussed with Aikawa-san, and still she hugged me like this.

I had cruelly antagonized two people, and yet completely overlooked a mass murderer. And Kunagisa didn't harbor a single negative sentiment toward me for it.

. . . .

Aikawa-san had been wrong about just one thing.

But it wasn't her fault. She probably just didn't have me fully figured out yet. By no means do I consider myself a deep person, but I do recognize that my sins run so deep there's no way to see all the way to the bottom. The depths of me were invisible, no matter what kind of contract work you did.

The reason I didn't want to have that discussion in front of Kunagisa wasn't because I was afraid of her judging me. It was because I knew she would *never* judge me that I never wanted to expose my ugliness or my ego to her.

Hers was an all-embracing love.

Unwavering, undiluted affection.

If I killed a person directly, she would probably forgive me even then.

She would love me all the same.

To me, that love was just a little too heavy.

I could feel it crushing me.

That wide-open devotion.

It wasn't that I couldn't feel affection toward others. It was that I couldn't receive affection from others.

No matter how much adoration Mikoko-chan showed me, all I could respond with was disdain for a murderer. No matter how much her feelings for me had inspired her actions, all I could see was another homicide.

And thus I was damaged goods.

And thus I was a human failure.

"Nonsense."

"Hmm?" Kunagisa lifted her body up just a bit to give me a puzzled look. "You say something, Ii-chan?"

"Nah, I'm not saying anything."

"Hmm. Ah, that's right. Ii-chan, wanna go on a vacation with me?"

"Vacation? That's pretty rare. I thought you were supposed to be a shut-in."

"Well, actually I don't really wanna go, either, but I'm helping someone out, so I've gotta."

"Ah. Well, okay, let's go. I haven't seen you much lately, anyway."

"Okay!" she said with a gleeful smile. It was the only expression she knew. But it was still more than I was capable of.

Not being able to respond to a smile with a smile . . . it really can give a guy an inferiority complex, eh, Tomoe-chan? I thought with a fair dose of self-deprecation.

"When do we leave?"

"Well, there's a lot to be taken care of first. Ahh, Professor Kyôichirô's place is so far. But we've got to rescue Satchan. It'd be better to go after your wounds are all healed, so I'm thinking probably around the start of July."

"Okay, gotcha."

"Mark your calendar. Ehehee," she chuckled.

I remembered something. "Hey, Kunagisa. Do you know what '*x* over *y*' means?"

"Huh?" she bent her neck to look up at me again. "What's that? A formula?"

"A dying message . . . well, not really, but you could think of it as one."

"Hmm." She thought for a single second. "Ah, is it in cursive, by any chance?"

"Yeah."

"Then it's simple. You just look at it in the mirror, then rotate it," she said as if it really was that simple for her.

"Correct." I said.

What was going through Mikoko-chan's mind when she left that mark? She had left it by Tomo-chan's body, just like some kind of dying message. All you could do was speculate, but indeed you could speculate.

Mikoko-chan probably didn't really want to kill Tomo-chan.

And of course, Muimi-chan didn't want to kill Akiharu-kun.

"But me . . ."

Maybe I wanted to kill both Mikoko-chan and Muimi-chan, in reality. After all, the me on the other side of the mirror was a murderer.

Either way, I fully accepted those puzzling symbols she had left behind. Why not? Nothing worth holding a grudge over ever made it through the mirror to this side. And the mirror itself had already crumbled.

A whole world had crumbled.

I took a look at Kunagisa.

When would it be my turn to crumble?

That contemptible "soothsayer" had prophesied that it would be another two years. But she was an even bigger liar than I, and I couldn't accept those words as the truth. I doubted my mind would last that long.

Mind aside, what about my heart?

Whatever the case, my time was sure to come.

A time you might call my final judgment.

"Uni? What's wrong, Ii-chan?"

She blinked at me with those big, pure pupils.

That azure hair.

Exactly the same as five years ago.

And now it was five years later.

Sooner or later, the time would come.

When I'd buckle under the weight.

And the urge to destroy her would arise.

Even then, she was sure to forgive me.

Even if she was murdered or destroyed, she would forgive me.

Just as she had done five years ago, with that innocent, beaming smile, as if nothing had even happened.

There's a difference between being forgiven and being saved.

Nonsensical though this may be.

Before these things occurred.

Not to serve your passions. but simply to serve yourself, to do something that *should* be done.

Please.

Quickly.

"Tomo."

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

Just saying.

They were hollow, entirely empty words.

Words anybody, *anybody* could say.

Just substanceless vocabulary.

"And I love *you*."

Kunagisa laughed.

And that was all there was to it.

Ultimately, that was all.

"*That's the Ikkun I love.*"
And thus, "*I wanted you to save me.*"
I had just one response to that.
A single phrase I wanted to send to Mikoko-chan.
Likely, they were the same words Tomo-chan had for me.
And indeed, they were suitable.

"Don't be so spoiled."

<Easy Love, Easy No> is a BAD ENDING. . . .

AFTERWORD

So you often hear people say, "Don't be choosy about how you achieve your goals," but as a human, I feel we should at least be allowed to choose how we go about achieving something. If you really sit down and think about it, trying to achieve a goal without carefully choosing a method could end up being disastrous. For example, if your ambition is to become a professional baseball player, you've got to get there by playing baseball right? If, however, you instead proclaim, "No, I don't want to be choosy about how I achieve this goal! Curse those who dare select their own methods!" and go out and buy a rugby ball, it seems to me that you're more likely to end up becoming a rugby player. Now what if, instead, you were to buy a knife, and what's more, practice swinging it a thousand times a day? Who here among us would take a look at such a person in the park at night and predict that he was destined to become a major leaguer? Of course, I know that's not what this saying is supposed to mean, but I just thought I'd put my own little spin on it.

Meanwhile, the writer of this very book could be thought of as *the* all-star representative player for people who aren't

too choosy about their methods, but upon serious contemplation, I'm surprisingly unsure of whether or not I really even chose the goal in the first place. "Hmm, so why is that what you want to do?" people will say, thereby effectively questioning the *purpose of your purpose*, at which point most people are prone to becoming very silent. And should we be even further interrogated, wherein we're confronted about the purpose of the purpose of our purpose, or the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of our purpose, or the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of our purpose, well, at that point we just give up, resulting in a silence to end all silences.

Thinking about it conversely, there's something wholly unappealing about the idea of a person who *could* provide concrete, logical answers to such questions. ("Well, the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of my purpose is this and this and that. Clear enough?"). Humans, in all their humanity, are much more cut out for living their lives constantly mistaking vague, unrealistic illusions for goals and/or methods.

This book, *Zaregoto 2: The Kubishime Romanticist*, sees the appearance of a homicidal monster who's lost sight of his goal and a murderer who can't find a method. This monster and this murderer think to themselves, "This is pretty weird," but they go on committing their acts all the while. The homicidal monster continues exercising his method, and the murderer continues pursuing her goal. Meanwhile, the side character that is our narrator sees these characters and scratches his head, thinking, "They're pretty weird," and yet he goes and projects himself onto them, and in comes the self-hatred. After all, to anyone with ugliness inside themselves, there's no

greater displeasure than taking a look in the mirror. Of course, if you don't have a mirror, you can't see yourself at all.

As was the case with the last book, *The Kubikiri Cycle*, there is a ridiculous number of people whose combined strength is to be thanked for the publishing of this novel. Above all others, I am most greatly indebted to my editor, Kastushi Ota-sama, and my illustrator, take. Thank you so much.

NISIOISIN

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Born in 1981, the prolific **NISIOISIN** has already revolutionized the Japanese literary world with his fast-paced, pop culture-fueled novels. He debuted with *The Kubikiri Cycle* in 2002, beginning his seminal *Zaregoto* series, and *Bakemonogatari* was published under Kodansha's popular Kodansha Box imprint. 2007 saw the magnificent conclusion to his twelve-month consecutive serial novel, *Katanagatari*—for which **NISIOISIN** wrote one novel a month for an entire year—also for *Kodansha Box*. **NISIOISIN** has also created novels based on popular manga franchises: *xxxHOLiC: ANOTHERHOLiC*, based on the series by superstar artist collective CLAMP, and *Death Note Another Note: The Los Angeles BB Murder Cases*, based on Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata's blockbuster series.

Born in 1983, **take** made his debut with the gorgeous, ultramodern illustrations for **NISIOISIN**'s *Zaregoto* series. Just as that novel cemented **NISIOISIN**'s reputation as one of the leading lights of Japanese pop culture, **take**'s illustrations for these best-selling novels made him a star in his own right. His first-class character designs have captured readers' hearts, and he is now ranked as one of the top young illustrators in Japan. **take** loves cats and manga genius Osamu Tezuka.

If you enjoyed this book—and you did, didn't you?—please consider buying it to support its original creators.

TYPED OUT BY A FEW ANONS ■■■ **ZAREGOTO.FTP.SH**

COLLEGE IS A WHOLE NEW ADVENTURE, RIFE WITH CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND COLD-BLOODED KILLERS.

Fresh from unmasking an assassin on a posh island paradise, Ii-chan is finally an ultra-cool college student—jaded, sarcastic, and not exactly consumed by academic ambition. Now more interested in angst and anomie than in catching killers, Ii-chan figures that danger is a thing of the past. Wrong! There's a homicidal maniac loose in Kyoto, a perp with the soul of an artist whose talent is apparent in the inspired way he festoons his crime scenes with body parts.

But then murder hits much closer to home. Hours after attending a friend's birthday party, Ii-chan learns that the guest of honor, a pretty co-ed, has been found strangled to death. What's more, Ii-chan is the prime suspect. The lackadaisical college kid had better hope that his crime-solving skills weren't just a fluke, because the killer is within striking distance . . . of **him.**

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Suspension

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SUSPENSION
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Kubitsuri Highschool

Act One·····Play It As It Lies

Act Two·····Shiogi's Iron Cordon

Act Three·····Hang 'Em High

Act Four·····The Dark Knife Rises

Act Five·····Backstab Rewind

Act Six·····End of the Line

Act Seven·····A Subjugation in Scarlet

After the Curtain·····The Lily Outgrows the Valley

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JUN AIKAWA — **A Contractor**

ICHIHIME YUKARIKI — **The Client**

ME (narrator) — **The Protagonist**

YUMA SHISEI — **"Zigzag"**

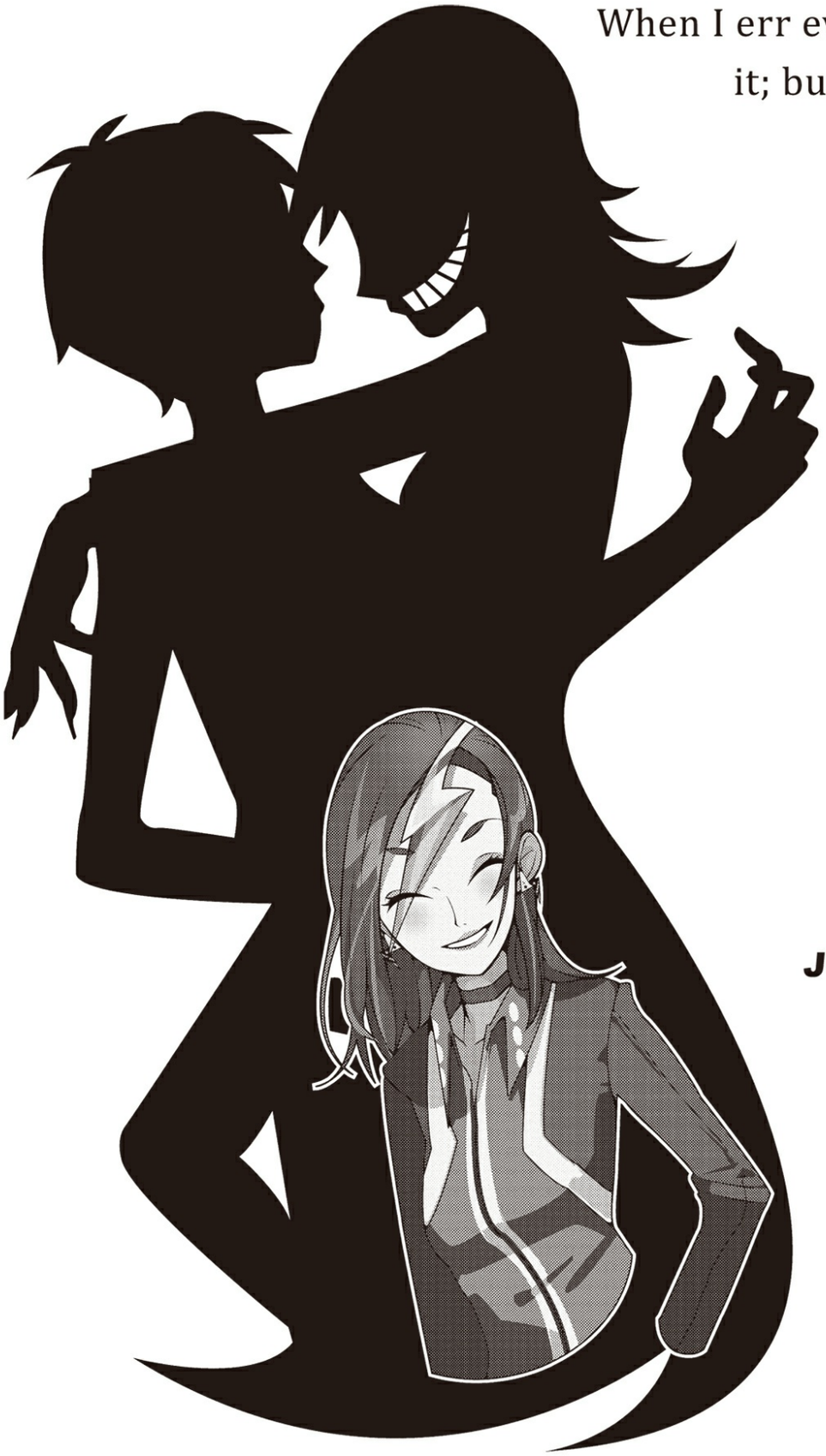
SHIOGI HAGIHARA — **"Tactics Expert"**

TAMAMO SAIJO — **"The Dark Knife"**

NOA ORIGAMI — **The Director**

When I err everyone can see
it; but not when I lie.

—Goethe



JUN AIKAWA
A Contractor

When all logically untenable possibilities have been eliminated, if whatever remains seems untenable, then it is.

I hadn't gone to class even though it was a normal school day, and I lay sprawled out on the tatami floor of my apartment engrossed in a book: Muju Ichien's *Tsumakagami.* It was an oldish book (which is to say it was clearly ancient) that my neighbor Miiko had leant me. So I treated it gingerly, even though I was only skimming. We generally read either to educate ourselves or just to kill time, and on this occasion it was the latter. So when a knock at the door interrupted me in the middle of turning the page, I wasn't particularly put out.

"Ahoyhoy. Sorry for the radio silence!"

My guest was, unexpectedly, Aikawa. What was unexpected wasn't that it was Aikawa, but that she'd taken the trouble to consider the common practice of knocking and to put it into practice. There was no point in interrogating her about why she'd knocked, so I simply replied, "Hey. It's been a while."

Jun Aikawa. Occupation: contractor. Gender: female. Height: tall–short torso, long legs. Style and Proportions: both first rate. The fact that every inch of her body was clothed in primary red may have represented a minor issue, but other than that there was no fault to be found with her bespoke suit. She possessed a beauty that one hundred out of one hundred people would acknowledge–if you got rid of the bizarrely malevolent look in her eyes, that is. As for her hairstyle, I was pretty sure she'd kept her bangs neatly trimmed at some point in the past, but apparently she'd let them grow out, and now their lustrous crimson fell to

her shoulders.

“Sure has. Oh, looks like your fingers have healed up nicely.”

“Yeah, thanks. So what’s going on? Oh right, please, come on in.”

“Nope, not today–”

At which point she flashed a cheerful grin my way. It was a vanishingly rare occurrence to see such an expression on her face–Jun Aikawa’s smiles were always full of irony and malice–so for a second I was at a loss. She didn’t seem at all concerned with such particulars, however, and still grinning, she reached out and put a hand on my shoulder; still grinning, she pulled me towards her; and, still grinning, she shoved the tip of the black, angular, extremely small but very serious-looking stun gun-like object she held in her other hand into my ribs.

A dull thud resounded from the region of my solar plexus.

“Nh. Guh…”

“Since we’re leaving right away.”

The Aikawa reflected in my eyes as they closed wasn’t grinning anymore.

Act One

PLAY IT AS IT LIES

ME (narrator)
The Protagonist

0

In this world there are only absolutes.

1

…Wha.

Unpleasantly jostled awake by the sound of some kind of vibration, I found myself in a car. To be more precise, in the passenger seat of a bright red Cobra. Where I seemed to be sitting. In which case the vibration was the sound of the engine running, which meant that the car was currently moving, which meant that someone must be sitting in the driver's seat. Finding this roundabout thought process too irritating, I glanced at the driver's seat. Just as I thought, it was occupied by Aikawa, whistling away like she didn't have a care in the world (disturbingly, the tune was the elegiac opening of the first book of *The Tale of the Heike*). She was holding the steering wheel in one hand and fiddling with her bangs with the other. The top was down, and she seemed concerned about what the rush of wind was doing to her hairdo.

"Hm? Ah, Iitan, you awake? 'Morning."

"Oh…hey. Good morning," I responded, shaking my head a little. "Um…where are we?"

I was watching the passing scenery out of the corner of my eye as I asked this, and as far as I could tell we seemed to be on a highway, though I couldn't immediately determine our current location. At the very least, it wasn't my apartment. Hm. No, the more pressing question was: why was I going for a drive with Aikawa? I didn't have a clue.

"My…memory seems to be a little hazy."

"I mean, that was some craaazy shit!" Aikawa suddenly raised her voice until she was basically shouting, and turned to face me. "Hm, I guess you must've forgotten, huh? No surprise there, after going through *something. like. that.* Must've been quite a shock. No one's gonna blame you for losing your memory. Not after *something. like. that.*"

"S-Something like that, huh?"

It even came equipped with staccato as a standard feature.

What was the deal? I couldn't remember anything, but apparently I had once again gotten myself caught up in some kind of incident alongside Aikawa. I see, in that case it made perfect sense that I'd be sitting in the passenger seat of her beloved car, nothing strange about that at all.

"Yup. A terrible tragedy, not the kind of thing you can sum up in a few words." She looked at me with an incredibly serious expression on her face, then shook her head slightly. "Another moment, even one, and you might've died…"

"D-Died–now that you mention it, my abdomen really hurts for some reason…"

"Yeah, the after-effect of your enemy's attack. No, not just an enemy. A 'formidable foe' with fearsome abilities…but have no fear. After I knocked…um, while you were knocked out, I took care of everything."

Then Aikawa proceeded to give me a full and minutely detailed account of everything that had gone on over the last three days, filling me in on the incident, which shock had completely erased from my memory. Though it took place over only three days, it was a tale of battle and war, a tale of tragedy and curious comedy, a tale of blood and gore, and above all a tale of love and sorrow. I had apparently stood on the brink of death time and time again, and Aikawa had pulled me back each time. To have escaped such a harrowing predicament not only with my life but with all my limbs intact was nothing short of a miracle. I never would've believed such a preposterous tale if Aikawa hadn't been the one telling it.

"That's quite a story… Forgetting such a catastrophic tragedy is pretty nuts, even for me. Please allow me to express my gratitude once again."

"Hey, cut the formalities. You're embarrassing me." Aikawa shrugged lightly. "At this point, you and I don't have the kind of tedious relationship where we have to thank each other for every little thing, do we?"

Giving me a forceful thumbs-up, she treated me to a quick wink accompanied by a lovely smile. Goddamn is she cool. No, not just cool, she's a great person. I've never known such a great person in all my life. Maybe I'd been wrong about her the whole time. I had thought she was sarcastic and conceited and only saw me as a plaything, but seemingly I needed to revise my opinion.

"I'm sorry, but you absolutely have to let me repay you for this. I'm one to three-fold repay you for all you've done, with more than just a high five. Protest all you want, but I'm going to pay you back whether you like it or not, and I won't take no for an answer. If ever you've got a problem, please, I'm at your service."

"I see. Well, if that's how you feel… Refusing such a generous offer would only

sully the purity of your sentiment, and we can't have that, now, can we…" Aikawa wore an expression of inner turmoil. "That reminds me, as it happens, by complete coincidence I do have a piece of business that only you can help me with. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will. Please, leave it to me. This nonsense user is willing to die for you."

Glad to hear it, smiled Aikawa.

There was something wicked about that smile.

"The fact is that we're on our way there right this moment. Let's see. Sumiyuri Academy. You know it?"

"Not much more than the name."

"How much more?"

"Umm…"

Sumiyuri Academy. A super-and-three-more-supers-precariously-balancing-on-top-of-that prestigious girls' preparatory school in the Kyoto suburbs, exclusively for the social elite–the princess type, in other words. Derided by some as a "vocational school for the privileged class," it's a peerless educational institution where exam percentile and pedigree are prized above all else, and which normal people the likes of me have no hope of getting anywhere near.

"Hmph. That all you got?"

"Yup. It's not just Sumiyuri, most schools maintain a policy of secrecy and insularity, so it's no easy thing for information to leak out. Even the stuff I just told you I only know because I happened to hear it from Kunagisa."

"Hanh? Why the hell does Kunagisa know all that? She's definitely a princess

in her own way, but she's a shut-in. What does she care about any school?"

"The part she's interested in is the uniforms. She's obsessed with sailor outfits and what not. She was lamenting to me, 'Woowee, Sumiyuri's is the only uniform I can't get my hands on.'"

"No shit? I didn't know there was anything she couldn't get her hands on. That makes me feel better."

"But, I mean, she said, *I'll never give up! I swear by the black of my eyes!*"

"Aren't her eyes blue?"

"Guess that's why she gave up. Anyway, what's going on with Sumiyuri Academy?"

"Oh, right. What I want you to do–is infiltrate the school *looking like that,* and get a certain student out of there."

When she said *looking like that,* I noticed for the first time that what I had on was not my usual get-up. Or rather, I noticed that I was wearing something downright weird. The top was a short-sleeved number, blacker than night, with matching buttons lined up on the left and right sides of the chest and an oddly oversized collar with a single stripe along it, the kind they call a sailor collar, accessorized as you might expect with a colored scarf. The bottoms were the same color as the top, a classy–pleated skirt. This was, without question, without supposition, and without a doubt not men's clothing.

"That's the Sumiyuri Academy uniform. I wasn't really worried since you're so slender, Iitan, but man does *that* suit you. Your hair's nice and long, and even the fall of your bangs is perfect. And your lack of individuality is actually a plus in this situation."

"Why–" I began as I composed myself after my momentary consternation,

“Why am I done up in this funky, fancy outfit?”

Was gender the theme this time around? Identity politics can be pretty thorny, not the kind of thing for a greenhorn to get involved in.

“I put it on you while you were asleep. Oh, um, your clothes were covered in other people’s blood, so I had no choice. I definitely wasn’t thinking about getting you involved in anything else at that point.”

“I never thought you were. But, um, this look is pretty embarrassing for a nineteen-year-old guy…”

“What’re you talking about? Disguising yourself in women’s clothing is one of the fundamentals of sleuthing. It’s an indispensable element, you might say, the standard to end all mystery novel standards. The renowned Holmes himself wore women’s clothing on a regular basis.”

“Who?”

“Mugen Mamiya dresses as a girl, what, a third of the time? In the action-adventure series, anyway.”

“I prefer the weird tales series, so…”

“Even that spiritual detective wore a skirt when he was investigating a girls’ school.”

“We’re borrowing a page from that?”

“Even Jojo wore women’s clothing in Part 2 when he was infiltrating the Nazis.”

“We’re borrowing a page from that?!”

“Even MacArthur had to wear a skirt when he was a kid, they say.”

“Please don’t resort to referencing great historical figures…”

“And Yamato Takeru no Mikoto–”

“Now you’re going to dust off mythology?”

“Zerozaki was also saying that he liked to wear women’s clothing.”

“Please don’t tell me such plausible lies.”

“I hear Hikari is into guys who wear women’s clothing.”

“Please don’t tell me such implausible lies!”

The white alligator seemed to be closing in…

That is, Aikawa seemed to be a little too into boys’ manga.

“What can you do. It’s a girls’ school. A guy can’t get in there looking like a guy.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but…”

Or wait, was that “true”? I had a feeling that something crucial was fundamentally wrong at a more elemental level.

“Enough already. Quit your griping,” Aikawa finally turned threatening. “A minute ago you swore you’d do anything I said. Well? Were you lying to me?”

I vehemently did not recall promising to go so far as to give up the last shreds of my human dignity, but Aikawa was right, I couldn’t be such an ingrate. *I understand,* I nodded. It was certainly true that even she would have a tough time infiltrating a girls’ school. Schools tend to maintain outlandishly tight borders, never mind Sumiyuri Academy. There were serious difficulties inherent in putting Aikawa in that uniform and sending her in (though I couldn’t deny a certain personal curiosity), and I myself could never get inside a place like that in my regular clothes. It was a mystery why she had picked me for the task, but I’d cooperate to the best of my ability. Not like I had anything better to do.

“Okay, here’s your forged student ID. You’ll need it for the checkpoint at the main gate.”

“Thanks.” The ID had my picture affixed to it. Such meticulous preparation, almost as if this situation had been arranged from the start. “Um…you said something about getting some student out of there. In other words, your job this time is a search and rescue?”

Jun Aikawa’s job–she was a contractor. Not exactly an occupation based in high-minded morals. Basically, she would take on any task regardless of difficulty as long as the price was right, be it solving a locked-room murder, collecting information, trafficking illegal goods, taking down a serial killer, or a search and rescue. But who would someone want to locate badly enough to employ a front-liner like Aikawa, the world’s strongest contractor?

“It’s not quite a search and rescue, but yeah, something like that. Sumiyuri Academy is a one-hundred-percent residential boarding school, and security is tight. Getting even a single person out of there is a big job. There are ways to do it if violence is on the table, but this time around we’re shooting to keep things as quiet as possible.”

Keeping things quiet–is definitely not Aikawa’s strong suit. She operates on the premise that “punching is faster than thinking,” so in her hands even a logical locked-room murder case ends up turning into an action movie.

“Anyway, the job this time around is to spring Ichihime… That’s the girl’s name, Ichihime Yukariki.”

“Spring her, huh… That makes it sound like the school is holding her captive.”

“Close enough. Schools are basically facilities for incarcerating students, aren’t they? Though the jailers call it education.”

That was all Aikawa would tell me, nothing in the way of a more detailed briefing. Not that that was anything new; without bringing professional ethics or anything into it, she simply didn't care for things like explanations or exposition.

"It is what it is"–that sort of simplicity seemed to be at the root of Aikawa's being. It was an enlightened ground that I, irrationally bound by theoretical rules and logical tools as I am, could never reach.

"Well, I won't ask about the particulars. I'm not all that interested, to be honest. You just want me to locate this student–what was it, Yukariki?–keep her safe, and get her out of there, right?"

"That's my perceptive Iitan. But you don't need to worry about the 'locate' part. Since she'll be waiting for you. Here, take this."

On top of my forged student ID she placed a map, presumably of the Sumiyuri Academy campus. There was a single red mark on the small scrap of paper. Seemingly this was the place where the girl would be waiting. Next to it was written "Year 2, Class A."

"As for how to get her out, I'll leave that up to you. Ichihime herself can give you the details… I'm pretty sure *that kid* will be able to give you a proper explanation."

I sensed Aikawa's peculiar brand of intimacy in the phrase *that kid.* It seemed she had some connection to the girl. Were they, friends? If so, perhaps this job was only half professional, and the other half was personal.

"And lastly, this…a visual of the target." Aikawa placed a photograph on top of the map. "That picture was taken when Yukariki was twelve, though, so try and imagine what she'd look like five years down the line."

“Five years at that age means she will’ve grown a lot. Won’t she look like a totally different person?”

I stared at the photo uneasily. It showed the innocent smile of a girl barely into her teens. No hint of irony or purity or mirth, just a genuine smile. Men of a certain persuasion wouldn’t be able to contain themselves. Trying to picture her that way five years along–as a high school second-year, I guess–I could say with confidence that she’d be quite the beauty.

“Why’re you staring at it like that? She your type, Iitan? Keep yer hands off her.”

“No way. I’m not much for younger girls.” I turned the picture upside down and dropped it on top of the map. “If she was older than me, it wouldn’t be out of the question.”

“Your sexual proclivities are so simple they’re complicated… Anyway, I’ll leave it to you. We’ve still got some time, so get some shuteye if you want.”

“Right… Oh, can I ask one more thing?”

“What?”

“Can I keep this uniform when the job is done? I’m sure Kunagisa would love to have it.”

Aikawa chuckled cynically and said, “Suit yourself,” then began to concentrate on driving. Which meant that up until then she hadn’t been concentrating on driving, despite the fact that we were on a highway, which was vaguely terrifying. Trying to massage away the lingering pain in my abdomen, I flipped the photograph back over and took another look at Ichihime Yukariki’s face.

Hmm. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but…

Something about it roused my interest, just a little.

Yeah, this girl’s aura was–

“Something I might enjoy, no nonsense…” I muttered too low for Aikawa to hear, before tucking the photo away in my breast pocket.

2

What does it mean to talk about a happy life? If it's a question of absolutes, then there's certainly a clear distinction between fortune and misfortune. And yet, however fortunate a person's circumstances may be, if that person considers himself unfortunate, he'll be unhappy. Conversely, however unfortunate a person's circumstances may be, if she self-identifies as fortunate, she'll be happy.

As long as you're judging things according to a standard of happy or unhappy, you have to surrender yourself completely to subjectivity. For instance, is someone who hits the jackpot in the lottery happy? From the perspective of an ordinary person, that would appear to be happiness. Yet for the person in question to consider himself lucky, he would've had to have the unlucky experience of "not hitting the jackpot" in the past. If this person was continually hitting the jackpot, that wouldn't be happiness, that'd be just another humdrum day. And of course the opposite holds true. How many people genuinely lament the bad luck of *not* winning the lottery?

Ultimately, people can only understand fortune and misfortune in relative terms. This means that things like "equality" can never actually exist in reality, that a truly impartial ontology is impossible. Fortune and misfortune are connected, and if you look not at the individual but at the whole, ultimately the two cancel each other out, it's a zero-sum game–

Was the kind of shaggy-dog story I was idly contemplating as I walked the halls of Sumiyuri Academy. I would be lying if I said I wasn't tense, but my

infiltration had gone startlingly smoothly thus far. Aikawa's counterfeiting skills were apparently flawless, though I would expect no less of the world's strongest contractor. And my disguise also seemed to be flawless, even if I didn't like it. Since my arrival I'd passed any number of people whom I assumed to be students of the academy, given that they were wearing the same black sailor outfit as me, but not a one had displayed any indication of doubt or suspicion at my presence.

Part of me was worried by the fact that it was all so easy, but as an intruder that was not something to complain about; it was all part of being the proverbial smooth criminal. Instead, I moved through the building at a pace that would arouse no suspicion, thinking to myself how lucky I was. Naturally I couldn't parade around campus with the campus map in my hand, so I relied on memory to find the appointed meeting place: Year 2, Class A. Anyone would agree that a student who was constantly looking at a map to navigate her own school was funny in the head.

"As far as I can tell, this seems like a pretty normal school, though…"

Given that it was a prestigious preparatory school for the princess set, I'd been expecting something a little more eccentric, something strange and different. Though when you really think about it, why would the facilities themselves hold any surprises? It was my own expectation that was off base there. Still, I can't deny that it was kind of anticlimactic.

"Since Aikawa was the one who asked me to do this, I figured it was going to be a lot tougher… But if this is all there is to it, seems like I'll be able to take care of everything in a snap. Fools rush in."

I had the feeling I wasn't using the expression "fools rush in" correctly, but whatever. I climbed the stairs, and, after getting a little lost, I found the Year 2,

Class A homeroom. There was no one around. Mm-hm, very convenient. It's not like I was being compelled to the utmost secrecy, but better to be inconspicuous if possible.

However–I still harbored some doubts. The fact that I'd succeeded at brazenly walking in through the front door–was, upon consideration, odd. Didn't getting in easily mean you'd be able to get out just as easily? I'd been convinced the students were strictly and securely confined within the school grounds, but that didn't seem to be the case. So shouldn't've this Ichihime Yukariki been able to leave whenever she wanted, without me, let alone Aikawa, having to get involved? And the fact that she could make this plan to meet me in the classroom seemed to indicate that her movements weren't actually curtailed all that stringently.

If at this point I'd thought things through a little more, I might've been able to sense something off about the "strange" atmosphere that hung about the school–the air itself somehow seemed to deviate from that of normal places.

Yet I didn't think about it particularly thoroughly, and just put my hand on the door to Year 2, Class A and went inside. The classroom itself was also a totally average high school classroom. Then again, I never attended a proper high school, so I really had no basis for saying so.

But that didn't matter. What did matter was that there was not a soul inside the room.

"Huh?"

This was a problem. Given how much I'd psyched myself up for my meeting with Miss Yukariki, this was way beyond a letdown. Maybe she was hiding somewhere in the room? It wasn't impossible. If she was hiding, where–

Just then, I thought I saw the cleaning supplies locker shake slightly. It didn't make sense that a locker would shake all on its own when the window was shut and the room was essentially devoid of breeze. A-ha, did that mean she was inside? Makes sense, that's very much the kind of hiding place a teenager would think of. The idea was probably to indulge in a bit of gloating as she watched her newly arrived escort stand around flummoxed, but I wasn't about to let her make a fool of me. I mean, up until three days ago I might've fallen for that trick. But these past three days I had cheated death countless times, in other words I had grown as a person, and against the new me this was less than child's play.

"What's thiiis? She's not here, what will I dooo," I murmured as I quietly approached the locker. Yup, if I gave it a good kick, I could startle her out of there like a frightened rabbit, no question. Such childish pranks needed to be punished. I was standing in front of the locker contemplating whether to use my left foot or my right foot–when,

Brrrrr

I felt chilly all over. At the same time, something was thrust into my back. Something thickish, and hard–almost like the barrel of a gun–

"Freeze, and stick 'em up."

I put my hands up as I was told. I didn't turn around. But even without turning around, I was able to glean a few pieces of information. The voice was that of a young–or at least an immature female. And judging by the height from which it emanated, she was much shorter than me.

A-ha, so the locker was a decoy… I was forced to admit that I'd fallen into a simple trap. It was a bizarre strategic blunder for someone who'd escaped the jaws of death as often as I had. So bizarre that if you told me Aikawa had in fact fabricated that whole story, that it was a bald-faced lie, I'm afraid I might've been convinced.

"Who are you?" came the question from behind.

To which I casually responded, "Jun Aikawa sent me," as if it was all no big deal. "But I've got no name to give you. You see, I pride myself on the fact that I've only ever told my real name to one person."

"…?"

The sensation in my back relaxed momentarily at my idiosyncratic reply. It was an opening not even worthy of the name, but I seized it anyway, dodged left, and spun around. I was prepared to go out in a blaze of glory, taking my opponent with me, but maybe because I was flustered, my legs got hopelessly tangled before I could finish turning, and I fell flat on my face. My "enemy" wasn't about to let that pass and instantly closed the distance, firmly thrusting–

An alto recorder against my forehead.

"That's a hell of a way to introduce yourself," I said.

"I'm sorry. When we see someone we don't know, we're taught to conceal our presence and sneak up from behind."

So saying, *the girl* whipped the recorder up and snapped it back down at an angle, like she was conducting an orchestra.

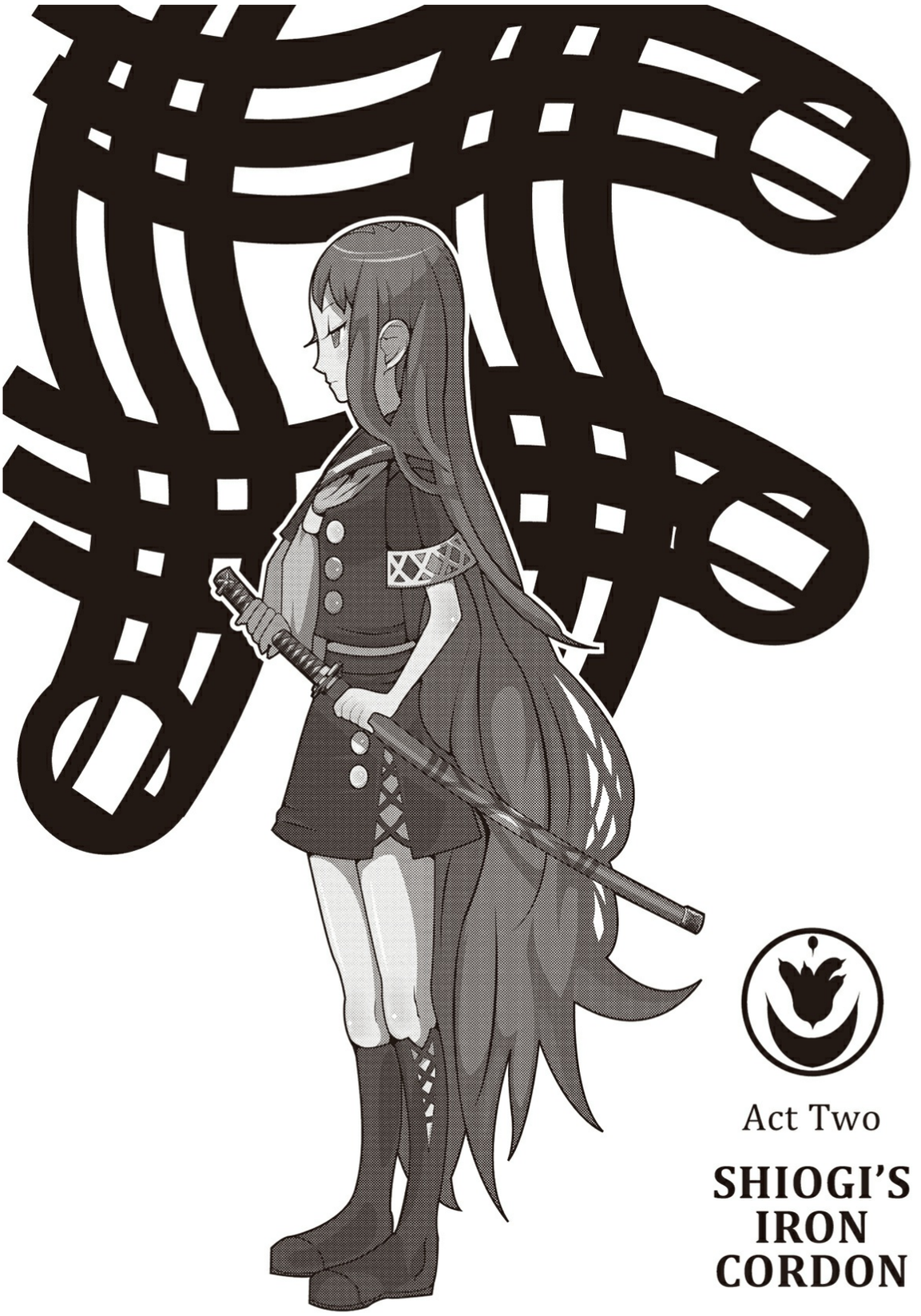
"Ah, gotcha…" I brushed away the tip of the recorder, and stood up. "Then, I'll teach you how to introduce yourself like a grown-up."

Now that we were facing each other, I took stock of this girl in her black

uniform, a small pouch slung from her shoulder.

There was no mistaking her: it was the girl from the photo. Yup, no mistake. Her appearance was almost identical even though the photo had been taken five years ago. It would be no exaggeration to say that she hadn't grown at all. Not just a small build; a tiny body. Not just an innocent face; a childish one. And–and that genuine smile.

"Nice to meet you, Ichihime Yukariki."



Act Two

SHIOGI'S IRON CORDON

SHIOGI HAGIHARA
"Tactics Expert"

0

Pooh-pooh to peekaboo.

1

Ichihime Yukariki–Hime-chan–had apparently been hiding under the teacher's desk.

"That's not much of a hiding place… If someone opened the door and went left, you'd be in full view."

"Precisely. That's precisely why no one would thinks to look there. Even you went for the 'obvious' choice of the locker first, Master. Now do you see?"

"…"

"What's wrong, Master?"

"Nothing."

After our opening skirmish was over, we introduced ourselves, at which point Hime-chan insisted in a loud voice, "Call Hime-chan 'Hime-chan'!" Well, a name is just a signifier anyway, so I acquiesced, but the problem was with what Hime-chan wanted to call me.

Master.

This wasn't even anachronistic. It was just that "If you're a friend of Ms. Jun's, then to Hime-chan you're something like a master!" What this meant was strikingly unclear to me. And since she said, "something like," it didn't feel remotely respectful. In fact, I felt like she was making fun of me.

"So, that's how I ended up coming to get you out of here… I was told you'd provide the details."

"Hmmm. That's a toughie…" Hime-chan folded her arms and acted very much like she was deep in thought. "We don't have much times, plus Hime-chan's no good at explanations. First thing firsts, shouldn't we get out of here?"

"…Uh huh." Her response left something to be desired (or maybe it would be more accurate to say her brain left something to be desired), so I wasn't exactly satisfied, but maybe Hime-chan was right. We couldn't leave Aikawa waiting around outside forever. "You'll need your student ID to get out through the front gate, do you have it with you?"

"I does."

In which case she could've just escaped on her own. I turned this doubt over in my mind once more. But I got the sense there'd be no point in asking Hime-chan about it. As far as I could determine from the five minutes of conversation we'd had thus far, I couldn't expect a straight answer out of her. My first impression of Hime-chan was basically of "a girl who speaks bad Japanese."

"Okay then… Shall we?"

"Comiiing!" Hime-chan circled around behind me like a puppy. Given previous events, this put me on my guard, but this time I didn't feel anything poking me in the back. "Let's vamoooose!"

Shaking my head at her misplaced cheerfulness and enthusiasm, I exited the

Year 2, Class A homeroom. “Keep quiet so we don’t draw attention to ourselves,” I cautioned Hime-chan, then took off down the hall. All I had to do now was retrace my steps, easy breezy. I couldn’t imagine what if any obstacles could be lying in wait for us, and it seemed like my duties would be discharged all too soon. I was thrilled it’d been so easy, but I started to feel bad for Aikawa. Like, was this really sufficient to constitute payback for everything I owed her?

“By the way, Hime-chan, how do you know Aikawa?”

“Ahhh!” She shrieked without any regard for our situation and pointed her finger at me. “Don’t do that, Master! If you calls Ms. Jun by her last name she’ll be angry!”

“So what… No, I mean, it’s fine. She’s not even here. Anyway, what’s your relationship with Jun?”

“Let’s seeee. She came to my rescues, back when that photograph you have was taken. That was five years ago now. Boy, that really takes me back.” Once again disregarding the circumstances, Hime-chan closed her eyes and gave herself over to nostalgic reminiscence. “So I guess she’s like my benefactor. Teeheehee, Hime-chan is even ready to die at Ms. Jun’s command. Though of course that’s proof of my faith that Ms. Jun would never do that, and it definitely doesn’t mean I want to die. But what about you, Master, what’s *your* relationship with Ms. Jun?”

“Friends, just friends. We’re just good friends.”

Repeating it three times only served to make it sound less convincing, and with a “Hmm?” Hime-chan cocked her head ever so slightly. But that tepidly truthful answer was all I had on hand. Me and Aikawa’s relationship–I’d never given it any serious thought. We’d met more or less by chance, and she’d gotten me to help her with her work, messed around with me, bullied me a bit

for good measure, and that was about it.

But never mind repaying her debt of gratitude to Aikawa, Hime-chan was compounding it, so I was confounded. Dammit, why couldn't she just take a page out of my book?

As we were about to descend the stairwell, two students came up it. A pair of girls. Uh oh, better be careful. Time to wrap up the conversation and casually walk on by without catching their eye–

"*THERE SHE IS!*" yelled one of the girls, instantly scattering all of my thinking to the four winds. Her finger pointed right through me at Hime-chan, where she stood behind my back. Before I could turn and say anything to her, Hime-chan grabbed my left arm and headed *up* the stairs instead. Dragging me along behind her–being dragged along by a tiny high school girl is a seriously uncool look, but I didn't have time to worry about that at the moment. She was yanking me forward, and, still clueless as to what was going on, I began racing up the stairs after her, almost as if we were fleeing from those two students.

As if we were fleeing–which is to say, we were. The two girls were chasing after us, pounding along behind us at an astonishing speed. I didn't know why Hime-chan had run from them, nor what their rationale for chasing us was, but at this rate they were bound to catch up to us sooner or later.

–*There she is!*

That made it sound like they'd been looking for Hime-chan. This job of Aikawa's was a "search and rescue" but–was this somehow connected? No, no time to worry about that. Right now we were on the lam. The most important thing when you're running away is to keep ahead of your pursuers, it's as simple as that. And Hime-chan, who was leading the way, was not what you would call fleet of foot. By which I mean she was slow. Really fucking slow.

Which makes sense, seeing as her stride was no more than half the length of the average person's.

"Sorry 'bout this." I sped up and pulled alongside Hime-chan, then put my arm around her waist and pulled her up into my arms.

"Kwaah!"

Hime-chan let out a strange shriek, but I didn't pay it any mind. She was just as light–lighter–than she looked. This much of a burden wouldn't even constitute a handicap–in fact, letting this burden run ahead of me would be a much greater one. I continued accelerating, and succeeded at shaking off the two girls who were after us. Or rather, they didn't seem to have a particularly strong desire to chase us, and at some point during my blind sprint through the school, I realized there was no longer anyone behind us.

"I think we cans stop now," Hime-chan said, still suspended at my side, so I stopped running and set her down. I looked around but didn't recognize where we were. Which was perhaps only natural, after all that racing around. Seemed like I was going to have to consult the map of this school I supposedly attended after all, there was no helping it.

"Phew." I'd gone on that mad dash without any warm-up, and my heart was beating so hard it made my ribcage shake. I wasn't tired, but I needed to rest. "Though sitting down in the hallway seems like a bad idea. Let's try that classroom."

"Okay," Hime-chan nodded obediently. "Still, you're a lot stronger than you look, Master."

"Nah, not really. You're just light, Hime-chan." I sat down on the teacher's desk. "So, what was…that? Hime-chan, are you by any chance on the lam?"

“I am, yes.” Another obedient little nod, for crying out loud. “Didn’t you knew that? Right now Hime-chan is on the school’s most wanted list. That’s why I need your helps?”

She had the tone of someone explaining some self-evident logic to a child, but I wasn’t listening. Well, now those girls’ reaction made sense. If they’d “found” someone who was on the wanted list, it was only natural.

Did the fact that she wasn’t being confined simply mean that she wasn’t being confined “yet”? Then Hime-chan hadn’t been hiding under the desk as a malicious prank to scare me. Had the students I passed on my way to Year 2, Class A also been searching for her? It sure hadn’t seemed like it, but… interesting. So *that’s* why she needed me to rescue her. At present, it was impossible for Hime-chan to escape the academy on her own.

“What the hell… You’ve gotta tell me that kind of thing up front. If you had, I might’ve been able to come up with some kind of plan… As it is, we just waltzed right up to them and gave ourselves away.”

“But you seemed so confident about getting Hime-chan out of here, Master, I assumed you must’ve had some kinds of secret plan up your sleeves.”

“…” Was this my fault? Well, in some overarching sense maybe it was. “Forget about that. Listen, Hime-chan, did you do something bad? The most wanted list, being on the lam–it sounds pretty serious.”

“Uhhh,” groaned Hime-chan. “It isn’t really. Though it might seems like it to them. I don’t know.”

“Are you maybe being bullied?”

No matter what novel angle you might try to observe her from, Hime-chan didn’t seem like the type to get bullied, but you can’t judge a book by its cover.

At this kind of princess prep school, who knows, I thought, but that was just prejudice talking.

"Bullied… I only wish."

I didn't know what that meant. In fact, I even got the impression Hime-chan was being evasive. It was almost as if…she was trying to look out for me, like, *you're better off not knowing.*

"There's…something strange about this school. I already knew it was special… but it's more than that. Hime-chan. Think you can give me a proper explanation?"

"Well, to put it simply, it's a high school."

Too simple.

"But, let me ask *you,* Master. How much…do you 'already know' abouts this school?"

"Aikawa asked me that too."

I told her exactly what I'd told Aikawa. Hime-chan listened and nodded saying, "Is that all?" just like Aikawa had. Apart from the cloud that crossed her face, that is.

"Okay, Master, do you know anyone…or does anyone you know know anyone, or no, it doesn't matter if you know them, but have you ever heard of a single person passing the entrance exam for this school?"

"Hm? Um…no–I guess I haven't."

"Pardon me for interrupting before you can says, 'That's just a coincidence'–but then, do you know of any alumnae–that is, do you know a single person who's graduated from this academy?"

“That’s–uhhhh…uh?”

Weird. I couldn’t think of a single person. No–that couldn’t be true.

Sumiyuri Academy makes up a massive portion of the recommendation quota for famous colleges not only in Japan but around the world, it’s a super-elite preparatory school, so naturally there should be tons of Sumiyuri alumnae among the prominent people in various fields.

Should be–and yet, I couldn’t think of a single one? Was that–*could that really be a coincidence?*

“Now do you see?” asked Hime-chan. “*No one matriculates and no one graduates*–that kind of high school isn’t a normal high school, is it?”

“But Sumiyuri is–”

“Huh?” Hime-chan looked genuinely surprised, but she quickly recovered herself. “Oh right, Sumiyuri–that’s the name of this school, isn’t it. I’d forgetten. Now that you mention it, the ‘teachers’ do call it that–that’s not what Hime-chan and the other ‘students’ calls *this place,* though.”

“Then…what do you call it?”

“‘Hang ’Em High’…”

I was struck dumb by the extreme masochism of that moniker.

A school.

A locked-room, closed-shop organization that maintains a level of secrecy and insularity it would be no stretch to call fastidious. Impossible to guess from the outside what might be going on inside. And once you append the modifiers “preparatory” and “for the princess set,” it becomes that much more untouchable. In other words, it’s no easy thing to shine a light on its internal

activities, *no matter what they might be*–was that the deal?

What–the hell had Aikawa asked me to do?

I had the creeping feeling that I'd gotten dragged into an outrageous, outlandish situation. Seemed like I'd stepped knee deep in shit again without even realizing it.

"Uhhh." Groaning a little, Hime-chan whipped up the tip of her finger, then snapped it back to its original position. The motion seemed to be a habit of hers. "We're screwed, isn't we. Hime-chan should've known better. I assumed Ms. Jun must've told you at least that much–"

There seemed to have been a crossed wire in the information relay. But it was nothing to blame Hime-chan for. No one would expect the person who came to break them out–and it did clearly seem to be a breakout–to be a rank amateur like myself. To insist they should have would be ridiculous.

"But why didn't Aikawa tell me any of this… Without knowing it, how could I complete my mission?"

Yeah, Jun Aikawa was the one to blame.

Ms. Negligence bore full responsibility.

"Hmm. But I don't think Ms. Jun thought it would be such a big job. Hime-chan kind of blew it on the way to the rendezvous point, so they're a lot hotter on my trail than Ms. Jun was expected. And now they've discovered that I gaved them the slip and hid. We can't stay in this classroom forever, either."

"Can you get in touch with Aikawa? You must've contacted her to set up the meeting, at least."

"When I got in touched her before they weren't after me yet. So I just used the phone in the dorm."

“Oh…”

It wasn’t that she wanted to escape the academy because they were after her; they were after her because she was trying to escape the academy–was that it? But that would mean this place was like a prison. Or maybe forget about the *like* part.

“I see what we’re up against…” I didn’t, I still didn’t understand the situation at all. What I grasped was that this was no ordinary school–that it was an abnormal place, neither preparatory school nor princess factory. “Abnormal… It’s certainly starting to seem that way.”

But if that was the case–then we were in my wheelhouse. Things had definitely not panned out the way I’d expected, but whether or not this was a sinking ship, it was the ship we were on, for sure.

“I guess we have no choice,” Hime-chan said. “Let’s keep hiding in here for now while we come up with a plan. This calls for a careful considerations. There’s nothing to worry about. If Hime-chan and Master can’t get ourselves outs of here, I’m sure Ms. Jun will come and save us. She’s soft on her friends, after all, she’d never abandon us.”

“Did you say, keep hiding?” I asked with my back to her, having gotten down from the desk and walked over towards the window. “That’s ass backwards–hiding would be a bad idea *precisely because we’ve been found out.* They already know we’re in this building. We have to take immediate countermeasures.”

I opened the window wide. Then, picking up a desk, I brought it over and threw it out. Having fled there blindly I didn’t know what floor we were on, but it definitely seemed to be pretty high up, and it took a few seconds before I heard the sound of the desk smashing on the ground below. Unconcerned, I

took the chair that had gone with the desk, as well as the desk behind it, and threw them both out the window as well.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Hime-chan launched herself at me and clung to my waist. “That’s super ridiculously conspicuous! It’s like you’re begging them to come get us!”

“I just turned nineteen this past March–” I stopped after the sixth desk and broke Hime-chan’s meaninglessly light hold on me. “And all I’ve thought about for those nineteen years was how to outsmart people. How do I get away from other people? All I’ve thought about has been how to escape. I don’t know what the deal with *this place* is–but no ‘place’ is gonna keep me from getting away.”

There was still no one in the vicinity of the pile of smashed chairs and desks on the ground far below us. But it was unthinkable that no one had noticed that much noise–and of course the ones looking for Hime-chan must’ve heard it. In which case they would naturally have to search the classrooms on a direct trajectory from the pile of debris. Which would include this classroom, but a lot of other classrooms as well. *Lead them on a merry chase along the path we’d taken here by intentionally leaving footprints everywhere we went*–too much evidence, a vast array of clues; that was more or less my strategy.

“Now, it’s dangerous here, so let’s go.”

“Okay. But Hime-chan almost never comes to this parts of the school–so I don’t really know which ways to go.”

“That’s fine, my map–” I felt around in my pocket. “…is gone.” Not only that, the photo of Hime-chan was gone too. Only my fake student ID was still there in the breast pocket of my uniform. I must’ve dropped the rest somewhere during the chase. What the hell. After all that big talk, I stumbled at the starting line.

“Well, we came up, so if we go down we should be able to get out of the building. And if we can get out of the building, I’m sure we can figure something out from there.”

“That’s a pretty half-baked plan.” Hime-chan sounded incredulous. “But you’re more optimistical than I expected, Master. I’m surprised.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I mumbled vaguely. I’m not an optimistic person, of course. An optimistic person wouldn’t spend nineteen years thinking up ways to fool people. If possible, I, too, would’ve liked to sit tight and silently wait for Aikawa to come and save us.

But–I couldn’t help thinking about it. About Hime-chan’s gloomy face when she referred to Sumiyuri Academy as Hang ’Em High. I didn’t know where I’d gone wrong, but I’d somehow ended up wanting to make sure that look never crossed her face again. It wasn’t about repaying Aikawa or anything, I just felt like it was my personal obligation to do something for her, if I could.

I’d probably ended up conflating them. Ichihime Yukariki–and Blue, back when she was known as a savant.

So this wasn’t even a desire to protect Hime-chan. It was just self-satisfaction–no, it might as well have been autotoxemia.

What an unbearable level of nonsense.

At that point I didn’t yet grasp the enormity of the situation, I had no inkling of the scale of the storm I was putting myself at the center of, I was a babe in the woods who didn’t know his ass from his elbow, so there was definitely a certain recklessness to my folly. Still and all, I didn’t think I would regret it, which is a rare occurrence for a relentlessly retrospective nonsense user like me.

I really didn’t think so.

Despite the fact that I’ve never once in my life done something and not lived to regret it.

2

“The fact is, Hime-chan–doesn’t really know neither.”

Retracing our steps would’ve been the quickest way to get back downstairs, but it would’ve been imprudent, to say the least. Which is why the first step was to find a different stairwell from the one we’d taken to get there–this proved difficult, however. Come on, such an impressively large structure couldn’t possibly have only one stairwell.

I hadn’t realized this before because when I was alone, I’d been following the route laid out on the map, but this building was like a maze–a three-dimensional labyrinth. Was it why the place felt so strange? The construction itself wasn’t actually that complicated, but the building was oddly distorted. It was warped. To the point that walking around in it was starting to make me feel uneasy. In such a squeaky-clean, brand-new building–what could this *composition* possibly mean?

“See, from the inside, it’s almost impossible to determine what kind of place *this* is, right? Good or bad, superior or inferior, fortunate or unfortunate, they’re all things you judge in comparison to something else, which is why Hime-chan has a hard time saying much of anything about this school. Why I can’t explain its properly.”

“I don’t think you need to make it so complicated.” At long last we discovered a stairwell, and I kept an eye on our surroundings as I said this to Hime-chan. “What *that* might *be* is irrelevant in reality. The only question is whether it suits you or not, whether it’s a good fit. If you want to get out of this school, then

that's all that matters. It's anyone who tries to stop you that's messed up."

Because the one thing everyone should be allowed is the freedom to run away–though I didn't actually say that out loud.

"But listen, Hime-chan–I get the impression this school doesn't teach the normal subjects, but in that case, what've you been learning this past year?"

"I told you. Stuff like, 'When you see someone you don't know, conceal your presence and sneak up from behind.'"

That wasn't just a joke to break the ice?

Hmm. I had somehow failed to really consider it, but she'd pretty much held my life in her hands at that moment. Not that you can kill someone with a recorder.

In other words–this Sumiyuri Academy had a fairly specialized curriculum–and was like a training facility–or a boot camp? Never mind the questionable legality of the situation.

The ER3 System's Fully Integrated Unified Studies Research Center, which I had once had the honor of attending, was similar in a certain sense. That organization very much rode the line between legal and illegal, and in their MS-2 Division, both mind and body were strengthened to the limit of their respective capacities–that division in fact specialized in the *production* of "The Orange Seed." But every division was involved in testing the limits of this thing we call a "person" in one way or another, if not to the same extreme. Even an exchange student like myself underwent the same special training. Washout though I was.

If *this* was *that kind of place,* however–then what the hell was *behind this academy*? To maintain this kind of facility, this level of secrecy, it'd have to be

something on the order of the Kunagisa Organ. In which case opposing them at all was a big mistake. Yeah, the only possible course of action was to turn tail and run.

Dammit, Aikawa had really flimflammed me. What a snake oil salesman. Not that I'd had any illusions about sneaking into an all-girls' school and having a dazzling, all-smiles escapade with a high-society naïf, but the revelation that this school was like that wartime military something or other, that was a bridge too far. Though, I hear snake oil is actually good for you.

"Strange…" After descending one flight of stairs, I realized something. "I made that huge ruckus, but nobody seems to be bothered about it at all–I don't sense anyone's presence in the building."

"Can you usually?"

"Uh huh. Because I'm a coward, I'm very sensitive to people's gazes and presences and so forth…but there's been nothing for a while now. I'm not looking to be found, but I was expecting to have to use a little bit of force to break out of here. And those two girls definitely recognized you…"

I may not have had a precise handle on our position, but we could've done with a little more of a reaction from the other side, no?

"If no one's after us, then isn't it okay to relax? It's like manga from heaven."

"…? Oh, manna from heaven, yeah… I mean, that's all well and good, but just traipsing down the stairs seems too risky… Let's make a lateral move."

"On a hunch? How geometric of you."

"I'm not sure it involves any metric whatsoever, but oh well." I looked at Hime-chan. "You weren't by any chance raised in America or something, were you?"

“Wow! How did you know?!”

“Just a hunch.”

Be that as it may.

In this situation there was a good chance of an ambush. Upon consideration, if they knew that Hime-chan’s goal was *to escape from the academy,* then there was no need for them to go to the trouble of chasing her. That would also plausibly explain why those two had given up their pursuit.

Which made it all the more imperative that I outsmart them, huh?

“Uh oh.”

I was starting to enjoy this a little too much. Even though it’d turned into such a hassle. I, who hate hassle more than anything, who do everything in his power to avoid making waves.

Must be Hime-chan’s fault, I thought as we turned down the hallway. Trying to blame it on someone else was typical of me, and pretty unfair, but when I looked at Hime-chan, so boundlessly cheerful in spite of the fact that we had our backs against the wall, getting all gloomy and worried and depressed about it started to seem foolish. I didn’t even need to bust out the nonsense.

They–really are similar, I thought.

Both looked so young for their age, both were so innocent and unaffected. There were too many similar *parts* to count. Could it just be a coincidence? I’d always assumed there couldn’t possibly be anyone else like *her,* but…

It was unsettling, as if the answer to X times Y had somehow come out different from the answer to Y times X.

“What’s the matters, Master? Why are you staring at Hime-chan like that…

Oh! C-Could it be!”

“It couldn’t,” I shut her down instantly. I had no intention of letting my reputation drop any lower than it already had. “What floor are we on, though? As far as I can tell from the view out the window, it’s got to be the third or fourth floor, at least. This is a real high-rise by Kyoto standards…but maybe that’s irrelevant, this far out in the suburbs.”

“Well, they do say a place for everything and friends in high places, you know?”

“Almost slipped that one by me, but you’re mixing metaphors.”

Hmmm? Hime-chan cocked her head in confusion…and that’s when it happened.

All of a sudden the door to one of the nearby classrooms flew open and four people–wearing the same black uniforms as we were–rushed out, all of them tackling Hime-chan. No other way of describing how violently they took her down. Before she had a chance to resist, they’d knocked her to the floor of the hallway and pinned her arms and legs in place.

“…!”

An ambush–I’d been concerned about the possibility, of course, but why here? Why not at the entrance to the school? It was pointless to set an ambush in a nowhere spot like this. Which is exactly why I had decided this route was safe, and decided not to go down the stairs–

“*Exactly why,* huh.”

Shit. They’d outsmarted me, which was exactly why I had to eat those stupid words now.

And the crucial thing here was that *all four* of our ambushers had gone for

Hime-chan. It's not like I'm all that strong, and you definitely couldn't call me buff, but surely I looked more solidly built than she did. She was like a little kid. The fact that all of them had left me alone and *gone for* Hime-chan meant–

That there were more *ambushers* hiding in the classroom.

And that they were stronger than these four.

"M-Maste–"

They covered her mouth before she could finish. The four didn't even look at me. Which also spoke to their faith in whoever was waiting inside that classroom. They didn't even need to worry about me.

What a joke…

For me of all people to lose a battle of wits.

"Shiogi Hagihara–"

Announcing herself, a girl–emerged from the classroom and fixed me with a gaze icy enough to freeze the blood. A thorough, meticulous look, as if she was appraising me. She wore a black uniform like the other four, which meant she was a "pupil" at this academy. Her long black hair fell all the way to her ankles, and was unusually beautiful; I have to admit that, in spite of the situation, I was somewhat captivated. By which I mean that her–that Shiogi's entire body radiated the same bewitching aura as the edge of a katana.

If Hime-chan was like Blue, this girl was more like that red–

"I'm acting as tactics expert at the moment."

"Hmm… 'Tactics expert,' sure." Nodding, I took a step back. Her presence was overwhelming. "I guess that means your 'tactic' worked like a charm, huh?"

"Oh. You're a boy?" said Shiogi, apparently first realizing this upon hearing my

voice. “It’s been a long time since I encountered a boy my age. The rest of you, take a good look.”

This was the inexplicable instruction she gave to the four who were pinning Hime-chan to the floor–no. She’d called herself a “tactics expert.” There was no way she was giving “inexplicable” instructions. There must’ve been something behind it.

“Okay then, lessee. Keiki, Roka, Ami, Shuki–take her to the same place as before. Keep her hands and feet bound, and don’t let up, even for a moment. I shall deal with this gentleman.”

Nodding at Shiogi’s words, the quartet dragged Hime-chan to her feet and headed off towards the stairwell. There was nothing I could do to stop them. Not with a serious obstacle standing in my way.

Belatedly realizing that the two girls we’d encountered on the stairs had been among the four, I faced Shiogi and asked, “Were those their–real names? They sounded blatantly made up.”

“Phew–that’s a relief.” Not answering my question, in fact not even facing me, Shiogi sighed like someone who’d just completed an onerous task. “Guess we managed to wrap things up before ‘Zigzag’ was deployed–I’m just glad we pulled it off without anybody getting hurt.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean you? Right, right…” With a smile not at all in keeping with her age, Shiogi courteously turned to face me again. “Now then, I’ll accompany you to the front gate, so if you don’t mind, it’s time to go.”

“…”

“What I’m trying to say is, *We’ll overlook this little incident, so get out of here,*

now–but maybe you're not getting the picture? Mr. Transvestite."

"Well, it's a hard picture to get, so I'm struggling," I replied, forcing myself to lower my voice. "I'm afraid I'm not so amiable–and I really hate losing a match I was expecting to win."

"Kind of inflexible, aren't you. Seems like we'll get along famously."

Shiogi was already moving as she said this. With flowing footwork–definitely some form of the martial arts–she grabbed my arm and spun around behind me, locking my shoulder joint in place. Though I was still standing, I'd been rendered immobile in the blink of an eye. And by this slender girl no less. The fact that I'd let my guard down was no excuse. Since she'd put me at ease for the express purpose of attacking me.

"I'm a tactician, so actual combat isn't my forte–but I take an interest in the basics of the art of self-defense."

"They even teach *that kind of thing* at this academy?"

"The answer to that is 'it's the only kind of thing they teach here'…but, none of that." Shiogi wrenched harder, and the sharp pain shooting through my shoulder intensified. "We can't have you taking such a cocky attitude, not when your back's against the wall. Don't you even know how to plead for your life?"

An icy voice. An overwhelming icy voice. I once again revised my assessment of this academy. Such tepid terms as training facility and boot camp were thoroughly inadequate. This was–quite literally…

A warzone.

"Now, out of respect for the fact that you seem to be my elder, I will, in my infinite mercy, offer you two choices–one is that you yield to me. The other is that I pull your shoulder out of its socket."

“…Who died and made you king?”

“I’m no king, even if I have fought my way to the top of my little hill–I’m just a tactician who couldn’t make it on the front lines.”

“Perfect. A fitting opponent for a nonsense user who didn’t have the sense to learn some useful proverbs instead–”

Pain flared in my shoulder. Apparently she only liked jokes if she was the one telling them. Shiogi was self-centered like that. “There’s just one thing I don’t understand,” she said, loosening her hold on me a little. “And not understanding something–the presence of an uncertain element, in other words–to anathema to a tactician. Uncertainty breeds instability, after all.”

“…”

“Why were you able to infiltrate this academy?”

That was what Shiogi asked me. Not *how,* but *why.* Almost like it was a question that rocked the very foundations of her world, as if she wasn’t asking about my methods so much as questioning something much more fundamental.

“Nothing special. I had a fake student ID…and I was wearing a uniform, so no one caught on, that’s all.”

“Are you trying to tell me *that* was all it took to deceive the students of this academy? That our security system is that low-grade?”

Sure–with what I’d ended up learning about the true nature of Sumiyuri Academy, sorry, “Hang ’Em High,” it was hard to believe my disguise could ever work. Even if I hid my gender by not speaking, it should’ve been child’s play to see that I was an outsider. No wonder Shiogi was incredulous. But I had no answers to offer in the face of that incredulity. It was such a lucky break that I wondered about it myself.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to try and hand me some nonsense about it being a ‘lucky break’…”

With those words, Shiogi wrenched my arm up once again. She seemed to be under the impression that she was regulating the amount of force she was applying, but on the receiving end it was unbearable. My other arm wouldn’t reach her where she stood behind me–and she had my heels off the ground, so I couldn’t counterattack with my legs. It was an impressive pinning technique, unthinkable for a novice.

A pinning technique. *Which is exactly why* there was a way to reverse it.

“It’s terribly simple,” I said quietly. “You just don’t understand because you’re a colossal moron, Shiogi.”

I thought I could actually hear the blood rushing to her head. In the next instant Shiogi twisted my arm another quarter turn–and with a *grrk,* the bone in my shoulder came loose.

“What,” a sound of shocked surprise emanated from none other than the person responsible for dislocating my shoulder.

Turning around the arm that she’d accidentally freed up by dislocating it, I faced Shiogi (yet to overcome her confusion at this turn of events), and with my un-dislocated arm I shoved her in the chest as hard as I could. However clever her words, her body was still only that of a teenage girl, and she flew back like a rotten tree, sprawling on the floor of the hallway in an ungainly heap.

“–ch!”

But she’d apparently managed to fall defensively, and sat up right away, glaring at me. I let her look roll off me like water off a duck’s back, and leisurely spread my remaining good arm.

“I really don’t have an answer for you other than ‘luck,’ Shiogi, but as for the other thing I’m sure you’re wondering about–last month I got involved in a certain incident. In the course of it, both my shoulders got dislocated. I forget how I ended up with those injuries, but…anyway, it becomes something of a habit. It’s relatively easy for me, at this point.”

“–nkk,” Shiogi groaned. “Then you provoked me on purpose and made me dislocate your–”

“You called yourself a ‘tactician,’ right? I’m something like *that* myself, so I get it, I really do. When something you haven’t planned for crops up, it totally throws you off. *That shouldn’t have been enough force to dislocate it*–I understand that feeling painfully well.”

Nothing compared to the pain in my shoulder, of course, but I didn’t let that show on my face. And while I was delivering this triumphant lecture, I was wondering: what do I do now? I’d somehow managed to escape her hold using an evasive maneuver that basically boiled down to a surprise attack, but it definitely hadn’t defused the situation. In fact, it may have just added fuel to the fire. If I couldn’t use my silver tongue to fast-talk my way out of this while Shiogi was still off balance–

Then I couldn’t go after the four who’d taken Hime-chan away.

“What am I, some kind of hero?” I muttered sarcastically to myself. Me, saving someone–the very idea. I’d never even considered the possibility of such an opportunity presenting itself. Was I just going with the flow? Was I being carried along, not by sentiment but by circumstance, as per the usual?

Shiogi looked at me doubtfully, before her eyes momentarily went wide with shock. She was looking over my head, her gaze seemingly directed at something behind me.

“Really going above and beyond, huh, Iitan.”

With this nonchalant greeting, almost like we’d happened to run into each other on the street and were exchanging pleasantries–the speaker clapped me on the shoulder. It was the dislocated one, so it hurt like hell.

“That you…Aikawa?”

“How many times do I have to tell you–call me by my first name. Mm-kay?”

She gripped my shoulder harder.

“Right, of course–Jun.”

Aikawa remained behind me for the duration of this exchange, during which I never took my eyes off Shiogi, who, for her part, couldn’t meet my gaze. Of course she couldn’t; as a tactician, she would never allow herself such a pointless distraction. How could she permit herself the folly of looking anywhere else when humanity’s strongest was standing there before her?

“Hahaha–turned out I was anxious about you coming in here by your lonesome, so I figured I’d help out with the rescue.”

“Gimme a break… In that case, why not do it yourself in the first place?”

“We’ll leave that enjoyable little chat for later. So, what’re you getting into? Let’s see now. You’re, Shiogi, right? You know who I am?”

“Yes, I do.” Shiogi glared at Aikawa with a look so piercing that the one she’d given me during our confrontation couldn’t even compare. Apparently…she’d been holding back when she faced me, if only because she had still retained her composure. “The first lesson we’re given after we ‘matriculate’ is about Overkill

Red, the Subjugation in Scarlet."

"What an honor," Aikawa laughed mockingly. "And? What tactic will Shiogi the Tactician employ next?"

"I'm going to run away."

With that brazen pronouncement, Shiogi leapt to her feet. There was not an ounce of fear or trepidation in either her attitude or her expression. In their place was indomitability–or rather insolence. It was the first time I'd ever seen an "enemy" take that attitude with Aikawa. And a child of tender years at that.

It was abnormal.

"You think you can get away?"

"I do–since Mr. Transvestite over there is injured," sneered Shiogi. "And I'm well aware–that Overkill Red is soft on her friends."

"…"

"And as for you," Shiogi glared at me. "Please don't ever forget–*what you did to me.*"

"Huh?"

Did I do something?

Aren't I the one who had something done to him?

"Well then, it's been a pleasure."

And with that, Shiogi turned her back on us and dashed off, her skirt and long hair fluttering behind her. I was dead sure Aikawa would go after her–but she didn't even move a muscle, she just stood there with her hand on my shoulder.

"Jun, are we just going to let her get–"

Flustered, I started to turn and face her, but–

“Maaasterrrr!”

I was prevented from doing so by Hime-chan, who appeared out of nowhere and flung herself bodily at me. However much of a lightweight she may’ve been, it was a total surprise attack, and she knocked me down onto the floor of the hallway.

What the hell is this little shit doing, trying to assassinate me? I thought, but… but there was no way I could say that to Hime-chan as she lay there atop me, massive tears streaming down her face.

“Waaaaa…aa.” In between fits of sobbing, she felt around my dislocated shoulder. “Your shoulder… I’m so sorry, it’s all Hime-chan’s fault–Hime-chan was, Hime-chan’s…”

“…”

You know, it hurts when you touch my dislocated shoulder like that–

Seriously, no seriously, is it really too much to ask, for you to pick up on that?

As she clung there, her arms wrapped around me, I noticed that the sleeve of her uniform was torn. Had it happened when those four tackled her? Naturally Aikawa had gone to rescue Hime-chan before she came to get me, so I assumed she’d driven off those four oddly named girls–nonetheless, it seemed Hime-chan hadn’t gotten off scot-free.

“…, oh, th-this is totally no big deal!”

Having finally regained her composure, she noticed what I was looking at and tried to hide her torn sleeve.

“It’s just an abrasion!”

“Sounds painful.”

Though it just means a scratch.

“…”

Right.

She may’ve been boundlessly cheerful, sunny, innocent.

Naïve, pure as the driven snow, but still.

That didn’t mean she was inconsiderate.

She was more worried about someone else than about herself. She felt another person’s pain as her own. Even though it was meaningless to do so. It wasn’t her fault I was injured, I’d done it to myself, but she wouldn’t accept that. Uncompromisingly affirming, unconcerned with the particulars, embracing me, wrapping me in her arms–

No, hang on.

That was somebody else.

Not Hime-chan.

She and Hime-chan weren’t the same person, and yet–

“W-Waaaa.”

Apparently once again overwhelmed with emotion, Hime-chan clung to my shoulder in an attempt to hide her tears.

“I keep telling you, that hurts.”

Not the same person, and yet.

Why this…

Tremulous, nonsensical joke of an emotion.

“Ichihime, get away from him. Are you trying to wreck Iitan’s shoulder?” Aikawa grabbed Hime-chan by her sailor collar and forcefully pulled her off me, then pulled me up with the same force. “Going above and beyond is great and all, but don’t overdo it, pal. Take it too far and it’ll become chronic, that kind of dislocation. Here, I’ll pop it back in for you, so hold still.”

“…”

Hold still, she says–I couldn’t have moved if I’d wanted to. To be precise, from the instant Aikawa had entered my field of vision, my body had become totally rigid, almost as if some psychic had cast a malevolent spell on me.

A spell.

Definitely.

Jun Aikawa in a sailor outfit would have that effect on anyone.

Act Three

HANG 'EM HIGH

0

Art begins and ends with imitation.

1

Unnatural–in this situation, which of these was most unnatural?

Me, a nonsense user who was instead used nonsensically? A contractor who baselessly claims to be the world's strongest? Hime-chan, attempting to escape from this unorthodox academy? Shiogi and company trying to stop her? The thing is, within the confines of this school, inside the walls of "Hang 'Em High," none of these was conspicuously abnormal.

"'Kay. Back to business. Whadda we do now?" grumbled Aikawa, as she unfastened the scarf from her uniform and fashioned it into a triangular sling for my right arm. I say "grumbled," but she didn't seem worried or put out; her grumble seemed to be a grumble of enjoyment.

"Good question," I responded, though I was more focused on the thought that her high school girl look wasn't half bad. I'd 100 percent assumed there would be something off about it, but turns out that everything looks good on someone as gorgeous as Aikawa. How can I put this, yeah, life's a bitch.

"Since I let that tactician chick get away, I guess they must know I'm here by

now. I was hoping you'd make a better decoy, Iitan…"

"Oh…sorry about that, I blew it."

I apologized immediately, but did she just say something about a decoy?

"We're in troubles, huh. What're we to do?"

Hime-chan's half-baked addition to the conversation didn't register any sense of urgency either. It was like they both lacked any sense of danger whatsoever. Aikawa was one thing, but with Hime-chan that was a problem. Given how easily she'd just gotten captured, she didn't seem to possess any of Shiogi's combat ability.

"Or are you actually amazingly strong, Hime-chan?"

"Not at all. Hime-chan doesn't need strength."

"Because this is an age of knowledge?"

"That's right. A wise man once said…" Here Hime-chan did that gesture again where she whipped her finger up and snapped it down, before pointing it straight at me. "It's all in the mind!"

"…"

Don't you mean, "Knowledge is power?"

That was definitely not a wise pronouncement.

"Uh huh. Hime-chan's a washout, which is why I kind of started to hate school. So I wanted to drop out, but they wouldn't let me. It would've been nice if they'd just let me left on good terms, but there was something about a non-disclosure agreement or whatever. That's why Hime-chan asked Ms. Jun for help."

"Ask and ye shall receive."

“Ah ah ah, I don’t want to hear that coming from youuu, Master!” She waggled her finger at me condescendingly. This girl had quite the abundant store of hand gestures. “Oh, and by the way. Hagihara, from before, she’s the number-one ‘pupil’ at this academy. She’s a third-year, my senpai.”

“Hmm…”

“So a little thing like a dislocated shoulder is nothing to beats yourself up about, Master. She may be a girl, but she’s of a different caliber. Or no, not caliber, more like payload. No, no, more than that, we’re talking megatons, she’s nuclear…”

“…”

I was getting kind of irritated by this girl. Had her true nature been revealed by Aikawa’s appearance? Was this the pain in the ass behind the curtain? What had those tears been all about?

“Hanh. Anyway, we’d better forget about breaking through their lines with a frontal assault,” said Aikawa, tiredly pushing her bangs out of her face. “Shiogi Hagihara–nothing to fear just because she’s top of her class, but either way, I have a hard time with *that kind* of person. I’d prefer to avoid dealing with her if possible.”

“Oh, so that’s why you let her get away? I didn’t know there was any kind of person you had a hard time with, Jun.”

“Well, there is. So self-confident even though she’s got nothing–bursting with pride even though she’s completely hollow–I’m no good with that kind of walking contradiction. I just don’t get them.” Aikawa turned to scrutinize me. “Should I be including you in that, Iitan?”

“Uh…no, you’d be saying me and Shiogi are birds of a feather.”

Seemed to me Shiogi was more like Aikawa.

“Nah, that’s just the recklessness of youth. My arrogance and her insolence are different things. You and her *are* birds of a feather, in that regard as well. Mirror images, insofar as you’ll both end up caught in your own webs. Feh, tactician–what a laugh. All right. Would’ve been nice if you’d gotten Ichihime out of here for me, Iitan…but what can you do. Let’s try the opposite of a textbook move.”

“The opposite?” The polite prompt came from Hime-chan.

“What do you mean by that?” The dubious question came from me.

“Well, this might actually be the more legitimate tack–but we’ll take the fight to them. Instead of trying to force our way out, we’ll force our way in–to the faculty building, where we’ll have a tête-à-tête with the ‘Director.’ I’m talking about negotiating for Ichihime’s right to withdraw from the school.”

Nice and simple, right? said Aikawa, with a curl of her lip.

I couldn’t even manage to squeak out my surprise. And once again (I have no earthly idea how many times this made, but anyway, once again), I was filled with admiration for her. While I had spent my life thus far considering only how to outwit people and run away, she had lived hers thinking only of the exact opposite. Facing her opponents head on and declaring war, boldly and proudly marching forth to battle. Thinking only of that.

“But Ms. Jun–”

“It’s fine, Ichihime. I’ve never liked *that woman.* You don’t think too highly of her either, am I right? I’m actually glad to have a chance to put her down for the count. Right, now that that’s decided–let’s go.”

Having unilaterally decided to adopt her own plan, Aikawa started walking

away; taken aback by this abrupt turn of events, Hime-chan and I scrambled to follow. It already seemed to have been tacitly settled who had the leading part here, and who were in the supporting roles.

In carriage, in conviction, and in deed.

Overwhelmingly mighty and stalwart as stone.

Her confidence and pride neither false nor unearned.

Jun Aikawa harbors no inconsistencies.

2

From there on out it was the Jun Aikawa show, and that's all that needs to be said about that.

One thing's for sure, there was nothing and no one, even in that academy, who could stand in her way. She took out every obstacle organic or inorganic with literally a single blow, mowing down, decimating, repulsing, and generally having her way with every single foe (all of whom appeared to be students of the academy) who tried to stop her, effortlessly running roughshod over the various traps that had been laid throughout the school building, and after all the hoopla, hullabaloo, and whoopdedoo was over, after the absolute force of the raging tempest had run its course–that is, running after the course of that raging tempest, we finally escaped the school building and followed the roofed walkway to the backdoor of the "faculty building."

She was so overwhelming that there's no point in trying to depict it; she made such a mockery of their resistance that it's beyond description. Hime-chan and I, who'd been scurrying every which way in the face of just a handful of students before Aikawa showed up, were rendered essentially superfluous.

"You say 'essentially,' Master, but I think we really are supersfluous. Hime-chan and Master have both been totally useless so far."

"In making objective observations of that sort, it's best to avoid direct means of expression. Vague language is the cornerstone of the nonsense user."

"Hime-chan isn't whatever kind of weirdo you're talking about."

Weirdo? Thanks a lot.

“But Ms. Jun’s really something, isn’t she. She got even better than before. It’s a beauty to see such a glad-hander at work.”

“I think you mean you’re glad to see such beautiful handiwork.”

“Oh, you’re right. You’re the beauty, huh, Master.”

“…Rude.”

“Huh? Then you’re denying it?”

“No… I mean, I won’t not not not not admit that there might possibly be some aspect of the beauty in me.”

“So which is it?”

“Will the pair of you shut up already?” Aikawa chided, idling in the entryway of the faculty building. “I’m thrilled that the two of you are getting along so well and all…but doesn’t anything strike you as suspicious? I’ve been wondering about it ever since I got here.”

“About what, exactly?”

“Doesn’t it seem like everyone who’s attacked us has been a student? Isn’t that weird? It’s not out of the question that they’d leave it to the students as a training exercise if it were just the two of you, but…me? Jun Aikawa? Sending the ‘teachers’ or ‘security guards’ after me would just be common courtesy, don’cha think?”

I couldn’t decide if she was being judicious, or arrogant. But either way, it was true: all the people trying to stop us were young women, all of them wearing the same black uniform…that Hime-chan, myself, and Aikawa had on.

Wait a sec.

That I had on?

“Hey, Aikawa? Now that the cat’s out of the bag, think I can change out of this outfit?”

“Ah… Come on, what’s your problem? You look cute.”

“But, I mean…”

“Aww. Iitan’s so *moé*!”

“…”

That made it hard to take off the uniform. Or rather, she was basically coercing me into keeping it on. I somehow felt like she was toying with me, but anyway, back to the real issue at hand.

On the plus side, Aikawa’s strategy–of heading in, to strike at the core, instead of out in an attempt to escape–was not what they’d be anticipating. It was what you might call a surprise offensive. They thought they were the pursuers–that they were the predators. Which is exactly why they would never in a million years expect us to attack *them.* Even now, they probably thought we were just running around like chickens with our heads cut off trying to find a way out. In other words, they simply had an insufficient sense of urgency. Even up against Jun Aikawa, they hadn’t even considered the possibility that they might become the prey.

“’Spose so–ach, what a pain.”

“A pain? Isn’t it better if it’s easy? Then they won’t brought out the big guns.”

“That’s not what I was talking about, Ichihime–”

Aikawa drew one foot all the way back–and *kicked in* the iron door just like that. It crashed to the ground with a CLANG…must’ve been pretty rusted out. Had to be.

“I meant that it’s a pain having to bust down the door like this. So we can creep in through this rear emergency entrance like a bunch of sneaky cockroaches. Damn thing didn’t even have a keyhole.”

“…”

A-ha, apparently Aikawa would’ve rather marched straight in through the front door, announcing her name for all to hear. Instead we managed to get all the way here incognito, without a single “teacher” showing up. She seemed disappointed that, since we hadn’t been discovered, we had to use the back door. Always wanting to be in the spotlight.

“Pretty sure the Director’s office is on the top floor. She sure loves high places–c’mon, follow me.”

Aikawa, who naturally possessed a perfect memory (unlike me), had the layout of the school perfectly memorized. She hustled up the emergency stairs like she owned the place. “Oooh, a friend in high places is a friend in*deed*!” Hime-chan followed after her, mumbling another of her mysterious pseudo-aphorisms.

“We’ve got to avoid the staff room… Ach, what a pain in the ass. I don’t give a shit about schemes or traps, so go ahead: use your numbers and your supplies and your advantageous position, get up on your high horse and come at me!”

“If they do, we won’t have a chaaance.”

I don’t know what kind of history Aikawa and Hime-chan shared, but from this frivolous back and forth it seemed like they were quite close. Despite not having seen each other in a while, there was none of the expected awkwardness or distance, and, come to think of it, nor had there been anything said about friendship neglected, no attempt to thaw old acquaintance. Which conversely

seemed to demonstrate the intimacy between them. Aikawa obviously has a big-sisterly disposition, and Hime-chan is very much the type who stimulates a desire to protect, so in a certain sense they were a perfect fit for each other.

“Hunh?”

Hang on. In that case, wasn’t I a pretty irrelevant character in this little scene? I wasn’t wild about that. Especially when I’d had to dress up like this. With my raison d’être hanging in the balance, I decided to ask Aikawa a question.

“Um, Jun, from what you were saying before, it seems like the Director is an acquaintance of yours. So, what kind of a person is she?”

At that point the only thing I could imagine was a real villain. Gathering up innocent young girls and giving them this kind of special education. That’s one hell of a harem.

“Name’s Noa Origami, she’ll be thirty-nine years old this year.”

“That surname, Origami…”

Uh huh, Aikawa nodded without turning around. “Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami, Ekagami, and Origami. The bloodlines that represent the progeny of the so-called Four Gods and One Mirror. Then again, Noa’s not a direct descendant, she’s from a collateral branch, so her connection to the main family is weak. Which means that this academy itself has only a tenuous relationship with the Origami clan. Probably closer to Rule, actually.”

“Rule… Isn’t that Japan’s ER3?”

ER3 was more like a community while Rule was more of a network, but what they actually did wasn’t too different. So *this place* was something like the ER3’s feeder program…maybe?

“Bingo. Forty percent of the graduates go on to Rule. The rest, it depends… I

guess the valedictorian or whatever might go to ER3. Since they've got the higher brand recognition. Seems like that Hagihara chick might be headed in that direction, don'cha think?"

Of course Aikawa (unlike me) would know all about the academy's internal affairs, and about its "graduates." Hm, to put it in more everyday terms, they seemed to be "cultivating human resources," more or less. In that sense it really was a training facility, and the term "educational institution" wasn't so far off the mark after all.

And yet. A school where no one's allowed to drop out, where they nab you if you try to run away, where students refer to themselves as tacticians, a school which they themselves deride as Hang 'Em High–can you really call that an educational institution?

"Originally, Sumiyuri–Hang 'Em High's parent organization was established by Noa's mother. Back then, though, it was a relatively…only in comparison to now, of course, but it was a relatively normal school. A year and a half ago, her mother hanged herself. And after Noa took over, things went off the rails. It's difficult to say exactly how–"

"It's was the air itself," said Hime-chan, in an unusually crisp tone. She had her back to me so I couldn't see her expression–but I'm pretty sure it had turned gloomy again. She was a second-year now, so the new Director had probably already taken over by the time she started here.

"I put up with it for a while after I 'matriculated,' even though it was an awful place. But things just kept getting more and more outs of whack… Hime-chan wouldn't call a place where your friends die a 'school.'"

"Damn right," seconded Aikawa, fiercely stroking Hime-chan's head, then picked up where the girl had left off. "But you know, it's impossible to tell that

it's gone off the rails until you see it from the outside. With no point of comparison, you can't distinguish normal and abnormal, so it's only natural to see yourself as normal. And a school is a locked room that you can't see into from the outside. The insanity works its way deep, deep inside–it gets out of hand, and now here we are."

"Is there anyone else, Hime-chan? Any other students who think this is 'abnormal,' 'off the rails'? Students who want out of a school like this?"

"Used to be."

Those few blunt words were more than enough to shut me up.

"Despite what I said earlier…I don't actually hate Noa Origami all that much. Sure, she rubs me the wrong way, that much is true. I need to have a word with her. She can't view human beings as anything but numbers, she can't view people's deaths as anything but statistics. One person dead just means two people aren't dead. She thinks numbers are everything. But you know…it's not like I can't understand her vision."

"You…used to be friends, huh."

"Kind of. Though we had a falling out two years back."

So this is our two-year reunion, joked Aikawa. Though the humor seemed somehow forced. I had no idea why Aikawa, who was worlds better at deceiving people than even this humble nonsense user, would put on that little performance for us.

"Listen, Jun. Please don't let your feelings get the better of you."

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to? The point of this conversation is to secure Ichihime Yukariki's autonomy to drop out. I'm on top of it."

"Glad to hear it." I stretched languidly, feeling like a man who'd carried out

his duties in good order, then said to Hime-chan, who'd been silent for a while, "Hey, when you get out of here, what're you gonna do?"

"Good question," Hime-chan replied. "I want to have a tons of fun." Somehow this made it sound like she'd never done anything "fun" in her entire life. "I want a fun life where every days is Monday."

"Sounds terrible."

I let this sincere rejoinder slip, but my mind was elsewhere. It was stimulated. The weakest part of me–the nostalgic part, was being painstakingly and meticulously stimulated. Seriously…it's not even that they were similar. They were the same, Hime-chan and *her. In which case*–I thought. *Isn't this a chance for repentance, a chance to wipe away my sins?* I didn't really think I could cancel out having broken a person by rescuing someone else–I didn't even know how to go about rescuing someone, but–

"Don't let your mind wander, nonsense user," Aikawa slammed the door on my reverie. "Would you look at that, here we are at the top floor."

She got the emergency door open without difficulty. Jun Aikawa, the all-around contractor, the jack-of-all-trades who had reached the pinnacle of achievement in every possible skillset. Be it mindreading, vocal mimicry, or opening locks, there was no one better.

We hadn't gotten very far down the corridor when we came to a truly imposing door. Not the kind of thing that would ever be installed in a mere school. Forget about bulletproof, this iron door, this blast door, looked as if it could withstand a thermonuclear attack.

Aikawa gave a perfunctory knock (seemed like knocking was in vogue with her), but there was no response. Of course not. *Well then,* I thought, reaching

for the doorknob only to discover that this great iron door didn't even have one. No knob, and, like the backdoor downstairs, not even a keyhole. In its place there was a biometric hand scanner.

"Tch. Even I can't do anything about this."

"Really?"

"Even I can't change my fingerprints, ya know. Himecchi. What's the deal here?"

"All the doors in the faculty building are the sames," Hime-chan gave a thorough explanation once prompted. "Only the teachers themselves can lock and unlock them. You put your hand on the scanner, right, and it locks. Then you do the same, and it unlocks."

"Hanh. So no chance of a master key, huh… Wish we'd brought Kunagisa along."

True, if Kunagisa were here, she could work some computer magic and take care of this in no time.

Which reminds me, did Kunagisa know what was really going on at this academy? When she was telling me about this place, she didn't say a word about it. But she wouldn't want to tell me about that kind of thing, so it's possible she knew and just kept quiet. Either way, it was no wonder she hadn't been able to get her hands on a uniform. Now I realized why she'd been so quick to let it go.

Hunh? But then, how did Aikawa get her hands on a uniform (and not just one, but two)?

…Did she make them herself?

"Can you lock it normally from the inside?"

“I’m trying to remember. I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“Yeah? Then, maybe she’s in and just pretending that nobody’s home… Gimme a goddamn break.”

At that point, I finally noticed that there was a surveillance camera behind us. I informed Aikawa in a panic, but she dismissed it out of hand: “The circuit’s already been cut.” True, in spite of being a surveillance camera, it didn’t seem to be doing any surveilling.

“I took the liberty of attending to all those little details before I came to save you guys… I cut the alarms too. Quit worrying so much. Ah, shit. Does this mean we can’t get inside?”

“But you knocked and no one answered, so doesn’t that mean the Director isn’t in there?”

“Nah, Noa’s like me, she’s not interested in running away. She planning on holing up for a siege? Or is she just ignoring me… Either way, one thing’s for sure: she’s trying to make me look stupid.”

Okay, now I’m pissed, Aikawa muttered, the determination clear in her voice, and produced some kind of black lump from her uniform. It was a squarish object, small enough to fit perfectly in the palm of one’s hand: the thing colloquially known as a stun gun. Its chunky look was enough to make anyone instinctually fearful.

“Ms. Jun, it’s rare to see you with a weapon.”

“Yep. This is a special occasion. Since the need arose to get a certain person out of here in one piece–but anyway. Here we go…”

Aikawa pressed the tip of the stun gun against the biometric scanner and turned it on. Electric sparks flew and everything went crazy, then an instant

later a dull *BABABA* sound rang out. When my vision returned to normal, the scanner had been pulverized. A noxious trail of smoke was rising from it.

“Wow, that thing’s powerful…”

“Yup. I had it made special. And that was with the limiter on. Give someone a dose of this bad boy, and the shock’s liable to erase their memory of the last two or three days.”

So Aikawa claimed, but she must’ve been exaggerating. What kind of chump would lose their memory because of a little thing like that?

Aikawa peered perfunctorily into the guts of the scanner.

“Mm-hmm, fried those circuits good. The rest is a cakewalk… Come on, Maijin circuits? Guaranteed mediocrity. Okay, just gimme a sec.”

Aikawa shoved her hand inside the scanner, and just kind of *swirled* the contents around with her bare hand. She seemed to be begging for an electric shock, but knowing Aikawa, maybe she had some kind of special dermal coating? At last she said, “There. Unlocking complete,” and opened the door. I had assumed it would be automatic, given how massive it was, but seemingly that function had gone down when she fried the circuit board.

“Unh. Heavy bastard…”

She began pulling at the door with both hands, and slowly but surely it opened, sending an ominous slithering sound very unlike that of a door opening echoing down the hallway.

“…”

What an insane feat of strength. She certainly didn’t seem like someone who was about to engage in negotiations. She was clearly spoiling for a fight with the person in that room. Aikawa was pretty belligerent and hot-blooded, and I felt a

little frustrated at the thought that it might *come to that* after all. Dammit, why couldn't she learn a thing or two from ol' no longer human? He was a really good guy.

"Geez, Ms. Jun, still as headstrong as ever."

Even Hime-chan, a real Aikawa adherent, looked astonished at her behavior. Though her astonished look also contained a certain sense of relief, as if she wouldn't be Jun Aikawa otherwise.

Once the door was halfway open, Hime-chan and I followed Aikawa into the Director's office–

And there discovered the dismembered corpse of Noa Origami, divided into twelve pieces.

"…" "…" "…"

Chest, abdomen, pelvic region, left and right arms and hands, left and right thighs, and left and right lower legs–the former constituents of Noa Origami's body had been rent apart and now lay scattered around the room in a truly ghastly, truly atrocious fashion. The stench of blood, the stench of cerebral fluid, the stench of gore. Every inch of the luxurious carpet and every piece of furniture was drenched in blood. It was a wonder the stench hadn't escaped the room.

And Noa Origami's head–was hanging from the ceiling, her long black hair tied to the fluorescent light.

It was a scene out of a nasty snuff film. The face attached to Origami's head possessed a youthfulness that belied her thirty-nine years, but what did that

matter now?

A severed head hanging from the ceiling. How could one feel anything other than terror and shock?

“Did you–” said Aikawa in a quiet voice, suppressing her emotions. “Did you see anyone leave this room?”

Silently I shook my head. Hime-chan did likewise. None of us looking at each other. We were nailed to the spot by the sight of that dismembered corpse, as if nails had literally been driven through our feet.

“Ha. What a laugh,” spat Aikawa, her voice barely audible, before she began moving around the room. Her shoes were getting covered in blood and gore, but she didn’t seem to care at all. Under the desk, inside the sofa…she examined every possible hiding place in turn.

Next she walked past me, heading towards the door. I tagged along to have a look. She seemed to be inspecting the locking mechanism. She had only destroyed the exterior one, and its interior counterpart seemed to be relatively intact.

“Mm-hm, mm-hm… Interesting. Well, can’t be helped.”

As Aikawa muttered this, it finally dawned on me that the mutilated corpse was lying there in full view of Hime-chan. That’s, I mean, it’s too–but her eyes were ice cold as she gazed at the head suspended from the ceiling.

“Ahhh…” Hime-chan exhaled.

As if she were about to follow it up with a muttered *kicked the bucket, huh* or something. Like the reaction you might have to learning that something you had absolutely no personal interest in but were aware was important had in fact disappeared a long time ago.

“…So it’s finally *started.*”

“Hime-chan.”

“No need for concern, Master.” She looked at me and smiled a melancholic, troubled smile. “Hime-chan may be a washout, but I’m still a student *here.* Something like this doesn’t shock me.”

“Right. Fine then.”

It wasn’t fine. It wasn’t fine at all. But it wasn’t my place to step in. It wasn’t my place. I couldn’t step in–to Hime-chan’s mind. All I had to do was ask the simple question, “What’re you thinking about right now?” and it would all be swept away, but I couldn’t ask it.

Because getting real with people, interacting without any nonsense or disingenuous kindness, meant hurting each other. I didn’t want to hurt Hime-chan with a clumsy intrusion–and most of all I didn’t want to get hurt myself.

Any more than I already had been. In this kind of circumstance.

There was a loud clang behind me.

It was the sound of Aikawa shutting the door.

“This is an unfortunate turn of events–don’cha think?”

“It sure is…” I replied. As a means of distracting myself from my thoughts. “I can’t believe the Director’s been…murdered. This means that all the danger we faced to get here was–”

“That’s not what I’m getting at. Forget about that. It just means we need to choose a different approach. And there’s a more than limitless supply of possible means for achieving our goal. Dammit–I thought it was too easy getting here. So that’s how it is. I guess the order for this must’ve come from

somewhere."

"What do you mean?"

"Iitan. What's on my mind right now–is the fact that this is a *locked-room murder.*"

"Haah?" I accidentally let slip a moronic ejaculation.

But she was right. I mean, definitely, the door was controlled by a biometric handprint, and when we forced it open, there was a dismembered corpse and a head hanging from the ceiling–yeah. The door didn't appear to have an auto-locking function, so the term "locked-room murder" did seem applicable. But what did that even matter? The problem was that, with Director Noa Origami murdered, we couldn't negotiate with her, we couldn't do anything at all to oppose her–

"This is no time to be discussing something as inconsequential as a locked room, is it? Are you feeling rattled because someone you knew's been killed? Shake it off, Aikawa, it's not like you–"

"Don't call me by my last name. Only my 'enemies' do that," Aikawa glared at me. "I'm cool as a cucumber. Listen, Iitan. The fact that I usually call locked rooms *inconsequential* or whatever isn't just a personal prejudice, okay? They're meaningless, so I just laugh at 'em, that's all. Take that incident on Wet Crow's Feather Island back in April. What possible meaning could that locked room have had? That was just a case of 'I wanted it to be a locked room so I turned it into a locked room,' right? What I'm after now isn't the necessity for it, it's the meaning behind it. Putting yourself above suspicion by drawing attention to the fact that you couldn't have done it is certainly a clever ploy, but no matter what you do or how you do it, an absence of proof doesn't constitute proof of your absence. That kind of trick really is meaningless. In the end–you'll

get caught in your own web."

Totally. But.

"But this time it's incredibly meaningful," Aikawa went on. "It's got all the meaning in the world. Listen up, how did we get into this room?"

"You broke the lock–"

"Yup. Clearly an act of 'trespassing'… The act of a suspicious 'trespasser,' attempting to escape from this academy. And in the room, a butchered corpse. There's an obvious suspect in that situation, wouldn't you say?"

"Ah."

That's what she meant by meaningful…

In other words, *whoever* created this situation–had succeeded in *framing us for the crime.* By concocting a locked-room set up. She was right. Under the circumstances, what other suspect could there possibly be?

"Jun, this means…"

"We've been fucked, is what it means."

And yet Aikawa didn't seem at all humiliated by this. In fact, she seemed impressed by the person who had arranged it. "Seriously, what a laugh," she said with a cynical sneer.

No…hang on a sec. It was just as bad as Aikawa said, or, even worse. A sense of impending crisis finally overrode my confusion. It was bad enough that Shiogi and her cohort were after us, but now we'd been made the prime suspects in the Director's murder–

"What a way to go," Aikawa muttered. She began picking up the scattered pieces of the dismembered Director. "These wounds are pretty ragged. A

blade…or maybe a chainsaw? Yeah, that seems more likely. It's a big job, dismembering a person like this."

"You're probably right, there are bits of flesh scattered everywhere," chimed in Hime-chan. "Doesn't it seem like she was hung from the ceiling and then chopped up with the chainsaw?"

They were both talking about it so blithely–but what a horrible conversation. A chainsaw? Taking something like that, to someone's body…

"Could a fluorescent light like that hold a person's weight?"

"Sure, if you distributed its properly…I think."

"Dammit, you've really done it now, Noa."

Aikawa spoke not to me nor to Hime-chan, but to the head of Noa Origami where it hung suspended in the center of the room. Naturally there was no reply, but Aikawa continued undaunted. With a smile that, from a certain angle–looked just a little bit sad.

"And you were this close to realizing your 'vision,' weren'cha… Things don't always work out the way we hope. Which is what keeps things interesting, though I doubt you'd understand what I mean by that… There was something I wanted to say to you…but oh well. All is forgiven."

Then Aikawa crouched for a second before leaping up and undoing Origami's hair where it was fastened to the fluorescent light. The head thudded heavily to the ground, and Aikawa picked it up and put it with the rest of the body parts.

"Hm. Nothing seems to be missing…some of the *joints,* maybe. Well now…" And here she–Jun Aikawa–smiled the most, and I mean the *most,* wicked, vicious, horrible smile I had ever seen on her face. "Things just got fucking interesting."

Act Four

THE DARK KNIFE RISES

0

Ask God for the details.

1

And three hours later–after everything had gone dark, Ichihime Yukariki, Jun Aikawa, and I were still in the Director's office. I had already gotten used to the stench of blood and gore and finally managed to come to terms with the bizarre scene laid out before my eyes. Not that they were terms I wanted to come to, mind you.

As to what Hime-chan thought of this situation, she was waggling her finger around, whipping it up and snapping it down again as always. It looked like she was just at loose ends, but maybe she was pondering something.

Aikawa was Aikawa, so she was eating whatever she'd been able to find on the office shelves. At present she was munching on some fancy-looking sweets. How could she eat something like that here, under these circumstances? Did she have nerves of steel, or just a lot of nerve? Hard to tell.

"Jun. How long do you plan on staying here like this?"

"Huh? How many times are you gonna ask me that?" Putting a cookie between her teeth, she crawled over on all fours and stopped right in front of

my face. “What? Aren’t you hungry? I get it, I get it, you get grumpy when you’re hungry.”

“That’s not–”

“Okay, open wide!”

Aikawa tossed the half-eaten cookie into my open mouth.

Delicious.

“–That’s not it! We have no idea how close Shiogi and company are, but we’re still just sitting here–if we stay at the scene of the crime, won’t that make us even more suspect?”

“Man, I don’t get you. Why’re you so negative, always pooh-poohing this, that, and the other? Prince Pessimist over here. Ichihime, you tell him.”

“Master. Good things come to those who vote.”

“I have no idea what that’s supposed to mean.”

Come on, is she doing it on purpose?

“Point is, Iitan. The worst thing we can do in this situation is act rashly. To put it in shogi terms, this was a ‘masterstroke,’ okay? It ain’t checkmate yet, but we’re in a real pinch. These situations call for lengthy consideration.”

“But isn’t a bad idea worse than whatever whatever?”

“Yep. So take a breather. In other words, don’t panic,” said Aikawa, before flinging herself down on the floor. Sure, it was dry by this point, but lying down on that blood-soaked carpet didn’t seem to me like the act of someone in her right mind.

“Can’t we just leave it to the police?”

“The police aren’t coming. None of the characters involved in this are on the straight-and-narrow, never mind the school itself. This tale isn’t poor Sasaki’s time to shine.”

“None? But I’m a regular civilian. Don’t drag me into it. At least as far as this particular affair goes, I’m a total outsider. This is what the police are for. Why else do I pay taxes?”

“You pay taxes? That’s rough, you’re still a minor. But listen, Iitan. You seem to’ve forgotten something. The cops are fundamentally a publicly traded company. They’re the friends of whichever fine citizens pay the most taxes.”

Ah. Right, the academy had the intimate backing of both the Origami name and Rule… Compared to that, my taxes didn’t amount to a piss in the ocean. In which case, no chance of Sasaki and her partner making an appearance. Those two would definitely be out of their depth anyway.

“You’ve convinced me…but that doesn’t answer my question: how long are we going to stay here?”

“Thing is, I repaired the door so it’ll lock again, which makes this room the safest possible place for us. This is the safe haven of Hang ’Em High’s eminent Director, after all. Sound-proof, germ-proof, bullet-proof, what safer place could there be?”

“But the Director was murdered in here…”

Aikawa’s definition of “safe” seemed to encompass a psychological sense in addition to a physical one. And it was true, even the Buddha himself wouldn’t expect the fugitive Ichihime Yukariki and her troop to be hunkered down in the heart of the school, and in the Director’s office directly above the “staff room” at that. In that sense, biding our time in this room could qualify as “outwitting

our opponents.”

But if you asked me–that’s not what I would call it. Doing the unexpected, deliberately making an odd move, doesn’t constitute outwitting someone. That’s simply moving into someone’s blind spot. And if you move rashly into a “place” like a blind spot, you in fact become unable to move out again. You’re stuck in your place of refuge. I’ve experienced it before, so I know of what I speak. Not that she didn’t know a hell of a lot better than me.

Plus, there was one other thing that was bothering me–just as much as the locked-room murder of Noa Origami.

“*Guess we managed to wrap things up before ‘Zigzag’ was deployed*–”

Shiogi’s muttered words–those muttered words she let slip having momentarily forgotten that I was nearby, whether out of negligence or a sense of security, I couldn’t say.

“Zigzag”–no way that was a new model of Mobile Suit. In which case there seemed to be *something* inside this academy that even Shiogi the tactician hoped to keep sealed away.

“Listen, buddy… For someone who likes to keep things vague, you’re awfully fixated on getting results,” said Aikawa, sounding fed up.

“What do you mean? I can’t let that pass, even from you.”

“Didn’t you say something once about being ‘used to waiting’? Yeah, you really are a patient guy. If the waiting game was an actual game, I bet you’d win it hands down. But that’s only when you know what the outcome’ll be. When you can’t see what’s coming, you get anxious. Even though waiting is your forte, you’re no good at waiting for something if you don’t know what it is.”

“You’re talking like you know it all.”

“I’m talking out of my ass. ‘Resignation’ and ‘compromise’ are at the root of everything you do. So a situation like this, where you don’t know what to give up on or who to pander to, is, to put it bluntly, tough for you. But ya know, well, that’s the thing. You gotta try, gotta give it your best shot.”

Apparently she really had gotten fed up, because her speech started to lose momentum halfway through. I mean, you can tell me to give it my best shot all you want, but I still have no idea what I’m supposed to be giving it *to.*

“Jun, Master, we mustn’t fight amongst ourselves,” Hime-chan stepped in to mediate. “Let’s all try to get along. The three of us can’t get out of sync with each other now.”

“Ain’t it the truth. Ah, such a beautiful thing is friendship. Listen, Iitan, if you wanna leave this room, go ahead. I’m not trying to confine you or keep you here. Even if I’m trying to keep people out, I have no intention of trying to keep anyone in. If you go, though, you go of your own volition, so don’t count on my protection afterward.”

“…”

“But listen, Iitan, and listen good. All the other peaceniks in this country may have their heads in the sand, but the people here in this academy have turned their backs on the path of humanity and set out on a more dangerous road, whether because they have goals, or convictions, or because they have no choice.”

“Turned their backs, on the path of humanity?”

“You think this place is a training facility or a boot camp or something, Iitan, and it is. But it has another role as well, a more important one: it’s a front. A front–in other words, the best students here also comprise a tactical combat

unit.”

Then…forget about a school, we’re talking about a full-on private militia. A tactical combat unit of teenage girls. No need to ask *What year is it, anyway?* Of course the setting is today. But, but…

“If you underestimate them because they’re girls and they’re younger than you, you’re in for a rude awakening. As long as you and Ichihime are in this room, I, Jun Aikawa, can guarantee your safety, so siddown and shaddup. I’ve had enough fun for one day.”

“What about you, Hime-chan?” I turned the conversation to her. “Do you have an opinion…or any suggestions? In terms of knowing the terrain, you’ve been a student here for a little over a year, right?”

“Uhhh. Hime-chan thinks there’s no problem with leaving everything to Ms. Jun. I’m a washout, I don’t amount to much, and Master is an amateur at this kinds of thing. So I think we should follow the advice of the professional.”

She was right. So right that it made me sick. Not that I’ve ever been left feeling refreshed and invigorated by someone being right.

“And I think it’s true that this place is safe. You might call this room a sort of secret cemetery in the heart of Hang ’Em High.”

“You mean sanctuary.” Though the words are kind of similar, I must admit. “Don’t amount to much, huh… I have to say that if you can make that kind of level-headed judgment about yourself, maybe there’s no need to be so self-deprecating.”

“I’m not being self-deprecating. People are weirdly liable to lose control when they’re ‘strong’ or whatever, and that’s no good for anyone. Hime-chan strikes exactly the right balance.”

Lose control–yeah.

They lose control, then lose perspective, and eventually someone loses their life.

Indeed…I know countless people who've been driven crazy by their own needlessly excessive "strength"–or ability. Those geniuses on the island, Mr. No Longer Human, the list goes on. In terms of someone who has the power to take on the whole world but manages to maintain her equilibrium without a hint of anything having gone awry–there's Aikawa, and that's about it.

"Not to blow myself up, but Hime-chan thinks weakness is something to be proud of."

"You're a terrorist?"

Blow my own horn, she meant. Not that it martyrs anyway.

"Balance, huh–"

Then, what about me? Aikawa was right: so self-confident even though I've got nothing–bursting with pride even though I'm completely hollow–a "walking contradiction." No way around it, my equilibrium is as bad as can be. But I'm not crazy. I'm not. I think. I'm pretty sure I'm not.

"I hope not, anyway," I muttered, and finally let it drop with my usual, "It's all nonsense anyway."

2

Let's say for the sake of argument that there was a nonsense user who believed that killing was wrong. How would he respond to these questions?

"What's wrong with killing people on the battlefield?"

"What's wrong with a serial killer killing people?"

He would probably answer like this: the very existence of battlefields and serial killers themselves is wrong. Okay then, what about these questions?

"Is it wrong for a dog to kill someone?"

"Is it wrong for an earthquake to kill people?"

Would he say that the very existence of dogs and earthquakes was wrong? Not a chance, that would be mere sophistry. Reasons that come from conviction and convictions that come from reason are completely different things.

It is a firm and unassailable fact that there exist situations, circumstances, where one must kill. Yes, a reason to kill someone always exists as a certainty. Even when there's no reason why you *can't* kill someone, there is always reason *to* kill someone. So the important thing is to live out your days creeping around trying to avoid ending up with such a reason–and at that point in my thought process, I slowly opened my eyes.

Another hour had passed–Hime-chan was waggling her finger around as always (did it entertain her?), Aikawa was fast asleep where she had plopped herself down–and I got to my feet.

“Huh? Where’s you going, Master?”

“…The bathroom.”

“Understood. I’ll go with you.”

Don’t be ridiculous.

Reining her in as she started to stand up, I told Hime-chan the truth: “I’m going to strike out on my own, if you don’t mind.”

“On your own?”

“Yeah. Sorry, but I’m sick of playing detective.” I bobbed my head at her. Then, undoing the triangular sling Aikawa had made for me, I released my injured arm. “It’s like Aikawa said, I don’t seem to be able to handle it when I ‘can’t see what’s coming.’ It’s a new discovery for me. Though Shiogi said something about how ‘not understanding something’ makes her anxious… So maybe it’s something like that. I don’t mind vagueness, but I don’t much care for uncertainty… I guess I really am inflexible. Anyway, I’ve hit my limit, I can’t wait around here like this anymore.”

“That’s…” Hime-chan pursed her lips and looked up at me accusingly. “Samurai down, Master!”

Was she telling me to commit ritual suicide, because I was running away from battle?

No…she probably just meant to say *simmer down.*

“That doesn’t make any sense! Don’t you understand that if you stay with Ms. Jun, you’ll be absolutely safe? Even getting out of the academy will be easy if we just leave everythings to her. Now that we’ve managed to get them in a stalemate, why do you need to go acting so recklessly?”

“I don’t feel like arguing about it.”

“Too bad, because you’re going to listen to what I have to say. If you go off like a loose cannon, Master, it’ll endanger Hime-chan and Ms. Jun. As long as we’re a team, your everequal and opposite reaction directly affects our prospects.”

It was a serious moment, so I didn’t bother to correct her.

“I’ve considered *that.* Hime-chan. In this situation it’s actually better if I’m not here. You put it very aptly yourself: you’re not good for much–but I’m good for less than that, I’m a total amateur. Your best bet is to get rid of the dead weight.”

“That’s just–”

“One thing’s for sure,” I said over the end of her sentence, squashing her counterargument. “It may well be that it wouldn’t make much of a difference to Aikawa. My weight probably doesn’t mean much to her, dead or otherwise. But–here’s what occurred to me. No, what I realized–no, no, what finally dawned on me, I guess you could say. As long as I’m with Aikawa, I’m safe. Not only that, it could even start to make me feel a little cocky. The thought of being on the side of humanity’s strongest really fires me up–but that’s a problem. I don’t want to be fleeing the battlefield *because of that.*”

A blood-soaked room. Covered in gore. The assembled pieces of Noa Origami. The world’s strongest, sleeping so peacefully on the floor that I couldn’t even hear her breath. And in that environment, a nineteen-year-old straggler and a seventeen-year-old deserter were having this childish argument. Dammit, if this wasn’t comical, what was? If this couldn’t be called buffoonery, what could?

“In which case–I’m nothing but a thief. I’m the lowest of the low, slinking

around and somehow managing to stay alive. ‘Aikawa’s so strong that it’s nothing for her to parcel this out to me’–that’s the kind of grubby little parasite I am, no sense of crime and no feel for punishment. There’s been a lot going on lately, so I totally let it slip my mind. What kind of life I had chosen for myself.”

I don’t provide anyone with anything.

So I don’t accept anything from anyone.

I refuse anything and everything. That…was just about the last source of dignity I had left.

“Aikawa’s job this time around was to rescue you… It’s got nothing to do with me. This is absolutely, totally, positively someone else’s affair, and I’m only in the way. And that’s no good at all. I…don’t want to repay kindness with injury.”

I may not have much in the way of strength of purpose.

But a certain mulish pride, that much I’ve got.

“But, Master–”

“You’d better stop calling me that. I’ll never be able to be friends with someone like Aikawa. There’s no reason for you to call me that.”

I casually brushed her off, and for a moment Hime-chan looked hurt. I headed for the door, which could easily be unlocked from the inside. Though the mechanism had been destroyed by the jolt of electricity, of course, so it had to be done with brute strength.

Being protected by Aikawa. Which isn’t even a burden for her. Protecting Hime-chan. Feeling the desire to protect her, feeling fulfilled by that. Clasping hands. Becoming friends, cooperating.

I get it now, what a dreamy relationship.

So that's exactly what it is: a dream.

A dream is just a dream, after all.

"But, um…Mast, er."

"I told you to stop calling me that… Better learn some manners, kid." I turned around, and put my hand on Hime-chan's shoulder. Squeezing it a little–to demonstrate my refusal. "Please stop expecting me to be nice to you. Don't expect to get close to me. That kind of thing–rubs me the wrong way."

"–Ah."

Hime-chan shrunk from my words.

Look how easy it is.

How easy it is to break someone's trust.

Tenuous goodwill crumbles so easily,

And once again I'm on my own.

"I'm sick of pretending to be friends. This is my way of running away, Hime-chan. Just like you're doing. Then again, our opponents may be a little thrown off because of it–so you and Aikawa should feel free to do whatever you want in that window."

"Why… Why are you acting so distant, likes we were strangers?"

"Because we are strangers."

"But Ms. Jun–"

"I don't want to get in Jun Aikawa's way. Even if I wouldn't make for much of an impediment."

I was playing up the stoicism a bit, to be honest, but that was just my

mulishness again. Putting an end to the conflict between resignation and compromise.

Do you not understand what I'm saying?

Do you not understand where I'm coming from?

Do you not understand me?

Hime-chan.

That's a truly wonderful thing.

It goes without saying that Hime-chan was right. I was in the wrong. I couldn't have been more blatantly wrong. But–I had hit my limit. This was the limit for wrong me doing the right thing. I had no way of explaining that I had crossed a threshold. And I had no interest in explaining it in the first place.

Yup, that's how it was in the end.

The nonsense user refuses to make friends, even with Jun Aikawa.

"But, but–"

"Okay then, bye-bye."

Without waiting to hear the rest of what Hime-chan was going to say, I closed the door. Aikawa was one thing, but with those skinny arms and that slender frame, there was no way Hime-chan was up to the task of opening it. Even once Aikawa had woken up, I had no expectation that she'd come and save me if I decided to go off on my own. She'd said so herself. I mean, who knows, maybe she wasn't even asleep now. I'm sure she has no problem feigning sleep. Deception is her stock in trade.

Just like that pantomime routine she used to get me here.

"The crazy thing is, it doesn't make me dislike her even a tiny bit…"

That's probably because I like Aikawa, from the bottom of my heart. I like her, though that's worlds away from *liking* her.

"…"

Nevertheless. I couldn't see myself being good-natured enough to lounge around carefree and comfortable now that I'd finally cottoned on to the fact that she'd deceived me.

As for Hime-chan. Ichihime Yukariki.

When I realized that if I wasn't careful, I could get that girl caught up in it–what I was doing took on at least a smidgen of meaning. I laughed at myself even as I thought this, amused that I had ended up with so much sympathy for this girl I had only met a few hours ago. Was it just that I conflated Hime-chan with "her"? I didn't want to think so. But either way, I couldn't draw a bystander any further into my private game of repentance.

"And, hence, ends the nonsense."

I'm pretty sure Aikawa had said the staff room was right below us, so taking care to make as little noise as I possibly could, I headed for the same emergency stairs we had come up. Happily there didn't seem to be anyone around, and I quickly effected my escape from the faculty building. *Let's see now, where am I*–I had just been following Aikawa on the way there, so I had no clue where I was. I had no idea which way to go or what I would find when I went there, nor even which direction we had come from.

"…Well, whatever."

I decided to just start strolling…and with any luck, I hoped to run into Shiogi Hagihara. Seeing as Shiogi was, in the words of Aikawa, "like me." I didn't dislike–meeting people who were like me. Why, I don't know. Did I have some

admirable notion that I could maybe become close with someone who was like myself, or that they would understand me?

Visibility was poor. There didn't seem to be any lighting installed–which made perfect sense, since a school is not primarily meant for nocturnal use. Seemingly Sumiyuri Academy–no, no need to keep calling it by such a classy name at this point–Hang 'Em High didn't appear to have a night school. Or maybe they just had no need to distinguish between day and night.

"Seriously though, there really isn't anyone around…"

Aikawa may've driven everybody off, but still, they didn't seem like folks who would give up so easily. And I had a hard time believing there was a curfew… besides which I doubted the "faculty" was going to stay on the sidelines forever.

At which point–I realized something.

When the hell had the person responsible for the murder of the Director, Noa Origami–leaving aside whether you could call someone who did something like that a "person"–perpetrated it? From what Aikawa and Hime-chan had said, it seemed as though the current state of emergency had been declared by the Director herself. Which meant that, if nothing else, she must've been killed after she gave that order. And the smell of the blood, the texture of the flesh, hadn't been all that old. At the very least it couldn't have been more than a day.

And when it came to motive–those were "a dime a dozen." *Noa Origami's hobby was being hated by people, being detested by people, being resented by people, being cursed by people*… She sounded like quite a lady, by all accounts.

"Then is a struggle for power–a reasonable assumption?"

Pinning the crime on a fugitive and a couple of outsiders was an excellent gambit. And giving the students the opportunity to take revenge would boost

their morale. If there was one thing we could turn to our advantage, I suppose it was the fact that the Director's murder didn't seem to have come to light as of yet.

Ahh. So that's why Aikawa is holed up in there. By the time I came to this belated realization, a school building I recognized had appeared before me. This was–yeah, it was the one containing "Year 2, Class A," where I'd first met up with Hime-chan. Though that seemed like ages ago now.

"Oh, right. The photo…"

At this point the map was irrelevant, but that reminded me that I'd dropped the photo of Hime-chan at some point while we were running around. Should I look for it? That might also be irrelevant, but–I couldn't think of anything else I particularly wanted to do. I could just barely recall the way to the main gate from where I was, but I was enough of a pessimist to assume there'd be some kind of trap set there. And my intention hadn't been to leave the school. I simply wanted to get the hell out of that room. That discomfiting room.

I'd said all kinds of things to Hime-chan…but the truth is probably just that it was oppressive to be in there with Aikawa. Just that old boring pride. Though pride is always boring.

"Hm…doesn't happen every day…that someone affects me this much."

Was Aikawa just special? No, I had a feeling it wasn't that. Only one person was special to me–and that person wasn't present. Someone similar to that person, but not that person.

I went into the building, found the stairs, and went up them. The lights were off. It was dim, but I somehow felt like the visibility was better than it had been outside. Probably a question of concentration. Now then, where was "Year 2,

Class A”? Seemed as though I’d be most likely to find the photo if I began the search there. Had someone already found it, perhaps?

As I searched for it, my thoughts returned to the locked room of the Director’s office. There were two windows in addition to the door, but of course those had been locked as well. Double-locked, with no way to open them from the outside. And Aikawa had immediately checked every space where a person could conceivably hide…hm.

Which reminded me, there was something strange. Aikawa was right, the fact that it was a locked room was significant. It meant that we were being framed for the crime. In which case, there was one other thing… What about the fact that the Director had been “dismembered”? And was there some significance to the grotesque way the head was suspended from the ceiling?

It might not take all that long to dismember someone with a chainsaw…but why take the trouble? Had the corpse been dismembered because of some pent-up grudge, or had there been some necessity for doing so? There was no way it was as simple as *It’s called Hang ’Em High so I hung the head up high.*

“‘Dismemberment,’ huh…” Dismemberment, dissection, biotechnology, ecology. “Kinda reminds me of the Prof.”

Not that I had any desire to be reminded.

Just as I was beginning to lose myself in dark memories of my time as a student in the ER Program.

“Swayyy…”

A figure appeared before me.

“SWAYyy…”

Wait, that’s not right. *She* was already there in front of me, so why would I

describe her as a “figure”? I should obviously just say “person.” And yet–I couldn’t get a clear fix on her, flickering there amid the gloom, ever so creepy and ever so mysterious.

Her figure was indistinct, almost like she existed in a different dimension, or like there was some kind of membrane between us.

“…Stup.”

And she stopped moving.

Cropped hair and a black sailor uniform. Which was in tatters, as if she’d been beaten up by a gang of thugs, but that just seemed to be her style. And the arms poking out of its sleeves held–

“Hey. Lemme introduce myself–I’m Tamamo Saijo. A first-year.”

Right hand: an Eliminator 00.

Left hand: a Griffon Hard Custom.

She–Tamamo–had these two oversized knives, which were too unrefined and too deadly for the hands of a girl, at the ready. She held them both in a reverse grip as she stood staring at me, rigid and motionless, almost as if that were her natural stance. A hazy, vacant presence, with vacant eyes.

Guess I got a little ahead of myself.

Definitely wasn’t expecting the knives to come out. Can’t believe things are getting *this* unusual this time around… That island full of geniuses and that serial slasher were both way more straightforward in comparison. Who the hell was going to come out of the woodwork next?

I mean, this girl was overloaded with laughable features, from her clothes to her equipment, but where to start?

“School let out hours ago, kiddo.”

“That’s all you’ve got?” she quibbled with my jibe.

At least it seemed we could establish some kind of communication; Tamamo narrowed her eyes at me and smiled. Then, muttering, “Swayyy…SWAYyy,” she shook her head as if to clear it. It seemed like she had a migraine or something, like she was struggling to bear up under the pain. Or maybe she just had low blood pressure. She did look kind of sleepy. Perhaps noticing my stare, Tamamo collected herself with an *ah.*

“Hmm? Oh, these knives are just for fun… No need to worry.”

“Okay, good…”

I had happened upon a liar.

“Let’s see…yes. I was looking for you guys…yes. Hold on, though, weren’t the three of you…supposed to be together? Can I just not see ’em? Weird. Glasses, glasses…”

“…”

What was wrong with her? I genuinely wanted to know, insofar as the answer to that question was directly linked to my own survival. She was, what, cool, or hip, or the kind of girl who seemed like she might even have wings sprouting out of her back.

“Ahhh. Let’s see…” she shook her head. “Well, whatever. I’ll worry about it after I’ve stabbed you a few times.”

“You’re making a mistake, Tamamo.”

Paying no mind to her elder’s kindly words of caution, Tamamo crossed the two knives in front of her petite chest.

“Snikt… Heheh.”

She grinned faintly, and her cheeks reddened. She seemed to be feeling bashful. But the combination of that awkward grin with the glint of her blades was the stuff of nightmares.

Wielding a knife in each hand–that in and of itself wasn’t threatening. It meant that her arm movements and attack patterns were quite limited, and it also impeded her defense. In kendo, too, you wouldn’t even attempt dual wielding unless you were a serious master. But on the flipside, if you were such a master–you could manage two weapons with ease.

In other words, everything was riding on one question–was she a novice or an expert? And at Hang ’Em High, there were no novices among the student body.

“Hold on a sec, kiddo–”

“You can forget about begging for your life, I don’t want to hear it–umm, too much of a hassle.” Tamamo tottered slowly closer. “And please don’t call me ‘kiddo’ when we’ve only just met, it’s demeaning… I’m going to *slash you to ribbons.*”

Slash me–to ribbons.

Like the Director?

Like the Director was slashed to ribbons–by “Zigzag”?

“Hang on–I’ve got a question. Is this Shiogi’s plan, did she send you?”

“Naaah… Shiogi-senpai did seem to be cooking something up…but I’m no good with that kind of thing, so I just came after you on my own.”

Heh, dimples appeared on Tamamo’s face. It was all well and good that she had such a cute smile, but I would’ve preferred she stick to her group’s plan of

action. Do they not teach cooperation at this academy? You've got to learn how to get along with other people, Tamamo, that's what school is all about.

"Ready or not, here comes Tamamo-o-o… SWAY…y…y!"

And she came flying at me, her movements a total one-eighty from her previous laxity, her interlacing knives directed at my throat.

Yikes, the girl genuinely, seriously meant business.

Of course I couldn't possibly take her on, so I spun around and fled as fast as my legs would carry me.

"Hey…you can't run away," Tamamo mumbled, then gave chase, her knives still reverse-gripped in both hands. She was such a small girl that I'd figured I could lose her–but that was overly optimistic. I'm not slow, but Tamamo was too fast. It felt like being chased by Kuchisake-onna or Hijiko-san or some other urban legend. Dammit, had I only managed to escape with Hime-chan under my arm because our pursuers were too slow? In other words, had I gotten to a new level in the game? Tamamo, steadily closing the gap, suddenly hurled the Griffon at my head.

"Wh-Whoa!"

I narrowly managed to avoid it by flinging myself to the floor. This was no joke. Any way you slice it, that knife is not made for throwing, but she tossed it like it was a shuriken. Just how good was this chick?

Well, the very fact that she was wielding oversized knives with her skinny arms was abnormal to begin with. Did this school defy the laws of physics, too?

Then Tamamo plopped onto my back where I lay face down hugging the floor of the hallway, and held her remaining knife, the Eliminator, to my throat. All she had to do was draw it to the side, and that would be it for my carotid artery.

“What do you say in this situation again…checkmate? Nope, that won’t cut it. You don’t really seem like a king. How about…the brash knight is prey for the pawn?”

So I’m just a knight?

Another half-assed choice.

“Okay, now I’m going to ask you some questions…so please answer as truthfully as you can. Me, I don’t actually care, but the more truthful you are, the longer you live. That’s the deal,” said Tamamo in an incredibly listless voice. It felt like she was just going through the motions, as though not only conversation but life itself seemed to wear her out.

“Let’s see… Swayyy. Where are…Overkill Red and Yukariki-senpai? The thing is, we’d really like to find them.”

“I’ve got a question first.”

“Whaaat. That’s not how this works. I’m the one asking the questions.” Tamamo puffed out her cheeks. “But okay. Just this once. Too much hassle to say no.”

She didn’t seem to be much of a conversationalist. Apparently she’d rather make things easy on herself and concede anytime a dispute seemed likely. Such pliancy wasn’t exactly something I admired in a young woman, but in this case it was most welcome.

“Are you ‘Zigzag’?”

“Whaa? What’re you talking about, no way.” Tamamo shook her head as if that was totally unthinkable. “This is just a stab in the dark, but I’m guessing you don’t really know what’s going on? Did you get pulled into this by the Red Dread without knowing anything about the situation here? You don’t even

know about ‘Zigzag’… You didn’t do any research beforehand, or even–”

Apparently tiring partway through her sentence, Tamamo just stopped speaking.

Then, with a mumbled *swayyy,* she finished: “–ask someone?”

“Unfortunately, it’s my policy not to get too deep into things that seem like they might be bad news.”

“Okay. Then, let me ask you this… What’s your objective here?”

I’d been dead certain she was going to ask me about Hime-chan and Aikawa again, but instead I got this question out of left field.

“My objective… That’s–”

“It’s not to rescue Yukariki-senpai, is it? Nor is it to help out Overkill Red… Here’s the thing. Me, Hagihara-senpai, we all have a reason to be here doing what we’re doing.”

“…”

“But you, do you have a comparable reason? Do you have a reason that can stand up to all of ours for being here, doing what we’re doing? If so, please, enlighten me.”

“Tamamo.”

“Just rejecting it, saying it’s abnormal or unrealistic or something, that’s cowardly. You really shouldn’t be so quick to judge,” she said in an emotionless voice. “Or, are you so attached to your own value system and your own sense of what’s normal?”

Well, if you ask me.

The academy is weird–but what gives me the right to judge it? Aren’t I just as

weird?

“Oh, whatever, this is too much hassle.” Tamamo adjusted her grip on the knife so that she was holding it the right way around. “Time to die etcetera.”

The blade began to abrade my skin–

“–!”

Death.

I was horribly calm. Horribly calm, and pretty disappointed. Despondent. Was I going to die here, just like that? I’d always figured someone would kill me in some gonzo grand guignol. To go out like this, like some bit player who gets squashed under a crumbling building–no.

Maybe this was the only appropriate end for me. For an insignificant worm like me. I had assumed my tedious little life would flash before my eyes, but that dream too faded like the mo*ur*ning dew–

Tomo Kunagisa. Only Tomo Kunagisa remained in my thoughts.

Ah, how I wanted to see her again…

How I wanted her to know I was sorry.

“–”

At that moment, footsteps echoed down the hall.

The sound of footsteps trotting towards us.

“Master… Masterrr!”

Tamamo jerked around in surprise and looked in the direction this cry had come from.

“Yukariki, senp–”

And loosened her grip on the blade.

Without waiting to visually confirm that it was Hime-chan, I used the strength of my back and arm to flip Tamamo off me, then buried my left elbow in her solar plexus as I spun towards her. I didn't have the breathing room to adjust for the fact that she was a girl, or that she was younger than me.

Tamamo crashed into the wall of the hallway–and lost consciousness. No, even when she'd been awake she'd seemed unconscious, so maybe that's the wrong way to put it, but anyway, she stopped moving.

When I touched my neck–it was bleeding.

To be precise, a single layer of my epidermis had been cut.

"Masterrr!" This from behind. "I'm finally found youuu!"

"Hime-chan…" I turned around and finally laid eyes on her. "Why're you here?"

"Sorry," she said as she gasped for breath. "Hime-chan's late because I just couldn't open that door on my own. In the end I came through the ventilation shaft. There was an exhaust fan in the ceiling, that you could take off from insides the room. Teeheehee, it would probably be impossible for you, Master, but Hime-chan's small, so I managed to get out that ways."

It wasn't to hear her tale of toil that I'd asked my question. So there was an exhaust fan in the ceiling? Did I not notice thanks to the overwhelming impact of a suspended head? How careless of me. But more importantly.

"What about Aikawa? Is she with you?"

"Nnnh," Hime-chan growled like an animal. "I woke Ms. Jun up after you left. She said, 'People can do whatever the fuck they want,' and refused to help. She wouldn't even open the door for me. I had no choice, so I come alone."

“Hime-chan, *I come alone* isn’t…”

“You’ve wrong, Master,” she declared patly.

Staring straight at me.

“Earlier you argued me down, but you were wrong. *I can’t stick around because I don’t want to get in the way,* that’s just cowardice.”

“Harsh. Though, I can’t argue with it. Being a cowardly chicken is A-OK with me. Way better than ending up at some unforeseen outcome, anyway. Way healthier. I’ve said this a million times, but running away is the only thing I think about. From my enemies, and from my friends.”

I guess it’s ironic. That I of all people should want a clear vision of the future more than anything, after how hostile I’d been to that unpleasant fortune-teller.

“That’s just proof that you have the leeway to think about ‘the future’!” For some reason, and I really have no idea what that reason was, but for some reason Hime-chan really laid into me. “If you were really living each day like it was your last, you wouldn’t have time to think about things like that! I’m going to come out and say it, Master: aren’t you just slacking off?”

“Thanks for that, Hime-chan.”

I was aware. That my voice. Was getting shrill.

“What–do you know about me? What do you know about someone who has no choice but to slack off?”

“If nothing else, I know that you’re a nonsense user who does nothing but make excuses. No matter what you say, Master, you’re just scared of being around Ms. Jun.” Here Hime-chan’s tone became especially confrontational. With a little nasty mockery thrown in. “It’s just that you feel uncomfortable,

because being near a ‘massive’ presence like Ms. Jun makes you feel tiny.”

“Tha–hold it. Nobody talks to me like that. I–”

She’d hit the nail right on the head, and I almost lunged at her. It was totally unlike me. I barely managed to restrain myself, and I do mean barely. If Hime-chan hadn’t reminded me of “her,” nothing and no one could’ve stopped me.

Not the unchanging, unending, unyielding Thin Blue Line Between Life and Death. Not the Seven Fools, they who were closest to solving the riddle of the world. Not that painter who scattered discrimination and disdain in her wake. Not the transcendent one who saw only that which could not be seen.

Nor even–humanity’s strongest contractor.

“–What’s wrong with that?”

Being deemed useless.

My insignificance revealed.

And so being abandoned–what was wrong with being afraid of that?

What was wrong with being afraid of betrayal?

“Trust is sad. Trust is really sad. Everyone is alone. So the more trusting you are, the greater the shock of betrayal. Trust breaks, it crumbles, and it never goes back to the way it was.”

“But being alone is lonely.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that we’re alone. If you can’t live alone, you’d be better off dead. If you’re saying people group up out of loneliness, then the more people someone is able to trust, the lonelier he or she is. People who remain alone are sad, wretched, impoverished, ugly, piteous, isolated–and above all, noble.”

Like the girl who got strangled.

“Sullying that with the word ‘lonely’ is blasphemy.”

“Then you’re not lonely, Master?” asked Hime-chan. “You’re alone because you’re not lonely?”

“…”

“Hime-chan’s always been lonely.”

Ahh–come on.

Don’t look at me, not with those eyes.

Innocent. Pure. Simple. Generous. Affectionate. Honest.

Not now–not at me. Not how I am.

There’s no such thing as atonement, okay?

I want to run away. To run away. To run away.

To flee. To escape. To hightail it out of there. To scatter to the four winds.

Yeah, like that other time–

“How many times am I going to do this to myself.”

The strong dose of nonsense–gave me the urge to smile. When I don’t know a smile from a hole in the ground.

Yeah…that must be it.

Hime-chan doesn’t resemble her.

She resembles her the way she was back then.

That’s why I’m shaken up.

That’s why I wanted to get out of the Director’s office so badly.

“Nah…nonsense.”

But. I guess I was still human enough not to retread that path, at least.

“Uh… Master?”

“Forget it. What I meant is that you got me there. Yeah, you’re right, Hime-chan. This is no time for me to go being selfish, at any rate. My bad. You win… Is Aikawa still in the Director’s office?”

“Oh, y-yes!”

Seeing me give in, Hime-chan’s face lit up in the blink of an eye. Her smile radiated genuine happiness. A smile so vulnerable as to bewilder any who saw it. Dammit–my sense of guilt had gone bust ages ago, and I thought I’d gotten rid of it.

But if I had, then how come…

How come I couldn’t just let go? If I actually knew to reject everything, how happy I’d be.

If I could just kill myself, that’d be best of all.

“Oh, but knowing Ms. Jun, she may’ve gotten angry and left without us…”

“Yeah…that’s totally possible.”

“But more importantly, what do we do about her?”

Hime-chan cautiously approached the unconscious Tamamo.

“Good question. She was a serious handful. Oh, I haven’t said thanks yet, have I? I was only able to find an opening because you came after me.”

“No poblano,” she said, feeling around Tamamo’s uniform. What was she doing? As long as it wasn’t some pervy hobby of hers. “A-ha. Here it is, I figured

she'd be carrying a walkie-talkie."

It resembled a cell phone…but with way fewer buttons. Apparently it was a simple wireless radio for intra-group contact. Easy to use, and it fits in the palm of your hand…but so what?

"So, before she was knocked out, Saijo may have radioed someone…maybe Hagihara."

"That's bad news…"

In other words, this was no longer a safe place? Though if we were trying to go down, the stairs weren't safe either. We might bump right into them. Shit. We were more or less cornered… Maybe not fish in a barrel, but still, this was no barrel of monkeys.

"Hmmm." Hime-chan seemed deep in thought; then at length she opened the pouch she had dangling from her shoulder and said, "Guess I've got no choice. Last resort time."

"I've been wondering about that for a while. What's in there?"

"All kinds of thing. They call it the Hang 'Em High Swiss Army Knife. Not that it's actually a knife. Or Swiss."

With a flourish, she produced a number of spindles from the pouch. A bit big for sewing, but definitely not fishing reels either. The line was wound around them as full as it would go. Or no…maybe it wasn't line?

"What is that?"

"Line works. You might also call it wire or string." Hime-chan kept on pulling more spindles out of the pouch. "Silver and titanium wires. Both chemically treated to maximize their tensile strength. This ones are various types of fiber. Kevlar, aramids, carbon, lots of different kinds."

Kevlar was the only one I'd heard of. Pretty sure it's the material used in bulletproof vests. Line or not, nothing could hold a candle to it in terms of strength.

"It's used all over the places, in space exploration, military production." Hime-chan opened the window of the hallway, then opened the window of the classroom opposite, and began winding the various lines this way and that. While they were still on the spools they were visible, but only just. Unwound in individual filaments like that, the fibers were so thin that in the gloom of the hallway you couldn't see them at all unless you squinted hard. They looked like cobwebs that could be severed by a touch. When I went to test this theory, though, Hime-chan stopped me. "Ah ah ah, no touching. If you're not careful, you'll get your finger cut off."

Apparently I was the one who'd be severed.

"Hmmm…so this is piano wire, right? There really are all different kinds, huh… So, Hime-chan, what is all this? What're you doing?"

"I'm making a rope. The window frame wouldn't be able to supports both of us, so I'm doing some calculations to properly distributes our weight."

"Hold on. You're saying…" my words broke off for a moment. "You want us to rappel down?"

"You said what I'm saying, yes."

"You're kidding."

"It's fai-yai-yain!" Tripling the middle of the word like a rocker, Hime-chan puffed out her chest. "Master, please just give up and admit that you've been duped by Hime-chan!"

"That just means I've been duped…"

I said it once–

“That just means I’ve been duped!”

I said it twice.

Some part of me couldn’t help thinking–

I wish I’d just run away.

Act Five

BACKSTAB REWIND

0

The question isn't whether or not you can trust someone.

It's whether or not they'll stab you in the back.

1

To make a long story short, I successfully rappelled to the ground with Hime-chan in my arms. I'd done it before when I was in the ER Program (wearing a hundred-pound backpack), and the rope she had improvised out of the various filaments was way sturdier than I'd imagined. It took some time, since I had to favor my dislocated shoulder, but the fact that no one got hurt, and that we weren't attacked in mid-climb, was enough to make it something of a success. Once we were safely on the ground, Hime-chan tried to wind the various filaments back onto their respective spools, but in this she seemed to fail; she'd been too diligent in fixing the rope in place.

"These wires really are useful in all kinds of ways. You can use them in places of a rope like this, or you can make traps out of them."

"Hmm…traps, right."

I'd certainly heard of illusionists and such using lines in similar ways. String users, or maybe you'd call them wire users. I'm no assassin, but these could also

be used as a weapon. Or was that a shamisen string? I don't really know much about it.

"Wire–or string, huh. Hey, Hime-chan."

"Exqueeze me?"

"Couldn't someone who was really good with these kinds of things create the locked-room scenario in the Director's office?"

Hmm? Hime-chan cocked her head. "Are you talking about the needle-and-thread trick?"

"Maybe a version of that. A locked room isn't actually physically airtight. There's got to be a seam somewhere. Someone could set the whole thing up even without entering, even if the door is locked, just by manipulating lines like these. The ventilation shaft you came through would work just as well. Either way, they could wind filaments like these around the Director's body while she's in there, then pull, and presto: the Director is sliced to bits…maybe?"

"That'd be impossible."

"How can we know without trying it?"

"I knows. You're optimistic about the wrong things, Master." Hime-chan finally gave up on retrieving her lines and came to stand beside me. "First off alls. How did Mr. Culprit suspend the Director's head from the ceiling? Wouldn't that be impossible without getting inside the room?"

"Oh, right…"

"And wouldn't you have to get inside the room at some point to wind the wire around her body in the first place?"

"Yeah…no, hang on a second. If there's a ventilation shaft, then it isn't a

locked room at all. If the murderer got in and out that way…”

“They couldn’t got in that way. I told you, didn’t I? The fan was screwed into the ceiling, so no one could got in that way, and if they got out that way, they couldn’t return it to the way it was originally. Even if the Director had invited them inside, they couldn’t lock up after themselves on the way out, regardsless of whether they used the window or the ventilation shaft or the door. Ms. Jun checked them all, anyway. Didn’t you notice?”

“Uh-uh…”

I didn’t notice.

So the ventilation shaft was out, huh? The hand-scanner on the door was unquestionably insurmountable (even Aikawa couldn’t get it open without resorting to violence), which meant that the only possible point of breach was the window or that ventilation shaft.

“Plus, if someones was good with these wires they could definitely chop someone to bits, but the wounds would be a lots cleaner. They wouldn’t be all ragged like those were.”

Oh. True, the murder weapon was a chainsaw, wasn’t it. If Aikawa thought so, anyway, I figured she was probably correct. Jun Aikawa, contractor. The number of dead bodies she’d seen had to be on a different order of magnitude from someone like myself.

“A chainsaw…hm. Wait. Hold on a sec, Hime-chan. I was more or less joking when I said it, but…could you? Dismember someone? With those wires, I mean…chop them up, shred them?”

“Uh huh. They’re like a jigsaw. I tolds you, you’ll get cut if you touch them? Basically the same principle. Tensile strength is a question of how quickly and

how briefly you apply force, and to how small an area. Precisely because these filaments are so fine, they have the capacity to dismember a human body.”

“Hunh. Like getting a paper cut?”

“When it’s used as a weapon, they call it a wire saw or something. I learned abouts it in class. Monofilament swords, garrote wires, rigid cords. So-called concealed weapons, you know? Even a beginner can sever a finger if they follow the proper procedure, and a master can supposedly slice someone to bits with nothing more than a roll of electrical tape.”

“Seems like the kind of manga Aikawa would like. I hate to sound like Tamamo, but wouldn’t it be quicker to just stab someone with a knife and get it over with instead of going to all that trouble?”

“Sure. But it has all kinds of practical applications that a knife doesn’t. If you create a network of lines operating on the principle of the pulley, you can mounts a multilateral attack. Like a spider web, you know? Which is why the threads are called webs, and the people who use them are called weavers. This is a genuine, age-old combat technique. It’s the reel deal.”

Weavers, sure. Sounds totally normal.

“Nothing worthwhile has words like ‘genuine’ or ‘quintessential’ attached to it in this day and age. Damn…in the old days, people thought up some crazy stuff.”

Maybe they had no other choice in an age when life-or-death combat was a daily occurrence, but still, turning string into a deadly weapon?

“Right? Almost no one learns that kind of sci-fi trickstery these days anyway. It’s like something out of fantasy, and you definitely can’t learn it overnight. It’s like you said, Master, much quicker to just stab someone with a knife.”

Which is why it's usually used for safety, like we just did, said Hime-chan, before doing that thing where she whipped her finger up and snapped it back down.

"Almost no one–means that there are still a few people who learn it?"

"Right. There's even one here at the academy–they calls her 'Zigzag the Spider.' Crazy, huh?"

"'Zigzag the Spider'…you say."

"Uh huh. She's a third-year named Yuma Shisei, not that anyone calls her by her real name anymore. She and Hagihara are the top students here. Of course, the lines that 'Zigzag' uses aren't like these. Hers are the genuine article."

"Weavers and webs… Doesn't make for a very realistic story, does it. Is it really gonna be okay to introduce that kind of thing into the narrative?"

"Seems more realistical to me than a master detective or a locked-room murder. At least this kind of thing has a historical basis."

"What a dicey remark."

"Call it a disclaimer." Hime-chan began stowing the reels back in her pouch, complaining, "No-o-o, they're all tangled ups." But unrelated to this fuss, a flickering candle of unease had lit itself in my mind.

If this "Zigzag," this Yuma Shisei–whose superiority even Shiogi Hagihara and Tamamo Saijo acknowledged–were to take the field against us, would I be able to protect this bumbling girl, who seemed inept at pretty much everything? This was not a hypothetical question. "Zigzag" seemed unavoidable if we were going to forge ahead in our attempt to get Hime-chan out of this academy.

We had to come to a decision about what to do. Rejoining Aikawa was probably our best bet–as long as we were with the world's strongest, this

“Zigzag” was nothing to fear–but we didn’t know whether or not Aikawa was still in the Director’s office. In which case, should the two of us attempt an escape on our own? While avoiding the watchful eye of the “tactics expert” Shiogi Hagihara?

“A thorny problem…”

In retrospect, however, that “problem” was a triviality not even worthy of the name.

Caught up in pondering the triviality–I completely missed Hime-chan’s expression as she spoke the name Yuma Shisei.

If I had properly taken stock of that expression, the look of someone speaking with pride about her own honored “teacher,” mixed with a certain sense of resignation and a soupçon of contradiction and inconsistency, things might’ve been different. I might’ve been able to glean something of the relationship between Hime-chan and Yuma Shisei.

This was an absolutely irredeemable–tactical error.

“Any way you slice it, seems like we’re going to have a seriously tough time with this…‘Zigzag.’”

“We are. To be honest, without Ms. Jun, our only option would be to runs away. ‘Zigzag’ always wears gloves, so you’ll know her the moment you see her. Weavers always wear gloves, otherwise they’d cut their own fingers off.”

“Gotcha. Something to recognize her by.”

So, all we have to do is look out for someone wearing gloves?

“Oh, speaking of top students, that girl from before–Tamamo Saijo, she’s the number-one combat specialist among the Hang ’Em High first-years. They call her ‘the Dark Knife,’ she’s a feared extremist.”

“Sure didn’t seem like it…”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. Tamamo is the great hope of the academy, not like Hime-chan. You just got incredibly lucky, Master.”

“Lucky, eh?”

It had certainly been a close call. If Hime-chan hadn’t shown up, and if I hadn’t landed my subsequent counterattack…

But that had also probably earned me Tamamo’s undying enmity. The very thought was enough to freeze my blood. To be honest, I was way more compatible with a tactician than I was with someone like her, where you never knew what they were thinking.

“Tamamo doesn’t usually get sent on such insignificant missions. She probably got involved because of Ms. Jun… I expectorate Hagihara was behind it.”

Advancing another level in the game.

“Even if we didn’t have to worry about ‘Zigzag,’ there’s no way Hime-chan and Master could contend with a strategy devised for Ms. Jun. As long as she’s still here, we should do our leavened best to join back up with her.”

A baking competition?

“I think you mean ‘our level best.’ Though I don’t think dividing our forces was such a bad strategy–nor is you being with me instead of her, Hime-chan; I doubt they’d expect it.”

“But the danger is too dangerous.”

“Yeah. We might as well give up on figuring it out on our own, and leave it to the professional…”

As I walked a little ways away from the school building, it occurred to me that out here we had a bit more breathing room than we did inside. We had a better view of our surroundings, and there were fewer places for someone to hide. Hime-chan seemed to take it for granted–and I had taken it for granted–but if Shiogi was indeed the one currently devising the anti-Jun Aikawa strategy, did she know that the Director was dead? Shiogi was a tactician, a staff officer. She was very much not a simple student, top or otherwise. So I was pretty sure she'd have to check in with the Director at regular intervals, even if she did so through the "staff room" rather than directly–in which case, it was very unlikely that she and the other students didn't already know about Noa Origami's murder.

And if they didn't–then someone was concealing it. And if that was true, then the only conceivable candidate would be the "culprit." Someone at this academy–was manipulating the picture for her own ends. If it was a struggle for power, then maybe it was someone from the "staff room"…or.

Or, if it was one of the students.

Who would be most qualified to do such a thing?

"Hime-chan. What kind of a girl is Shiogi?"

"Huh? Why do you ask? That's a bolt from a clear blue moon."

"I mean, I'm just interested. As Mencius says, 'Know thyself and know thy enemy, and you shall meet no danger even in a hundred battles.'"

"That's Sun Tzu."

Corrected by Hime-chan.

"You're surprisingly uneducated, Master."

And the salt in the wound.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Ever heard of Fermat’s Last Theorem? I was the one who proved it!”

“Y-You was?! I had no idea, I can’t believe I was so rude! Sorry!”

“…”

Aaand she actually believed me.

“Anyway, I’d like a detailed report on Shiogi. Will you tell me whatever you know?”

“Let me see. Well, she’s very intense. Severe, is that the word? If she weren’t then I guess she might not be able to work as a tactician, but it still feels out of the ordinary. She’s like the Director that ways.”

“She’ll do anything to achieve her objectives?”

“No, Hagihara herself doesn’t have any objectives. She just adopts whatever strategy’s most effective to complete the task she’s been given. Hagihara doesn’t have any will of her own.”

“Interesting. I guess it’s not the place of the tactician to have her own objectives. If every piece on the shogi board had a will of its own, it’d be pretty hard to play.”

“In that sense, it’s less that Shiogi’s suited to being a tactician and more that she isn’t suited to being anything else.”

Hmm. Like me, just as Aikawa said–though, were we really alike? Shiogi and I were the same insofar as we had nothing inside ourselves. But it seemed like her options were even more limited than my own. Though that probably wasn’t her own fault, it was because she was stuck in this academy.

That’s the difference between people who belong to an organization and

people who can't belong to one. At that point–my interest in her was abruptly aroused. Including the suspicion that she'd murdered the Director.

"But just because she's a tactician doesn't mean you can let down your guard. Every student at this school acquires some skill at self-defense, including her."

"Yeah, I learned that the hard way."

"Kendo is Hagihara's specialty. She's second *dan.*"

"Second *dan*? That seems pretty average for this place."

"No, in kendo, second *dan* is nothing to sneeze at. Since ancient times they've referred to it as Kendo Sun Vulcan, you know."

They definitely haven't.

Shiogi Hagihara–Tamamo Saijo, and finally Yuma Shisei, huh? What a batshit-crazy motley crew of outstanding warrior-scholars. The road ahead was fraught with peril. If there was any saving grace, it was that the students who favored a direct assault, like the Dark Knife and Zigzag, tended to lack strategy.

"I gotta say. Shiogi, Tamamo–they're pretty interesting girls. If only I hadn't met them in this insane place."

Shiogi in particular was my type.

"You're soft on your enemies, aren't you, Master. That's what they call skyping with the enemy."

"Somebody put me out of my misery," I shook my head. "But no matter what you say, Shiogi, Tamamo, Yuma, they're all human same as us."

"They're all human different from us."

For once, Hime-chan sounded less than optimistic. With that gloomy expression of hers, naturally.

I looked her over again. This all started because Hime-chan wanted to quit this academy, because she wanted to run away from it–but there was no possible way they would go to all this trouble to stop her over something like a little “non-disclosure agreement.”

She’d called herself a washout, and I believed her, and Aikawa hadn’t contradicted her–but upon consideration, was it really possible that Ichihime Yukariki could be “a nobody washout” if she was friends with the world’s strongest?

This was total conjecture, but perhaps there was another reason why they were attempting so tenaciously to prevent her from escaping. For instance, maybe she had some kind of special abilities or mutant powers, which was why the Director didn’t want to let her go…

Maybe she was a “Dark Knife” like Tamamo Saijo, or a “Spider” like Yuma Shisei. But as far as I could tell from what I’d seen of her in battle thus far, she didn’t possess any direct combat skills whatsoever–if she did, she wouldn’t have been captured so easily by the tactician’s cordon. Then again, neither did she excel in strategy and tactics like Shiogi Hagihara. To put it bluntly, Hime-chan’s behavior, coming after me included, could be summed up by the words “rash and impulsive.”

It somehow didn’t add up. It was like trying to do a Rubik’s cube with seven colors. When a jigsaw puzzle has too many pieces, it makes it impossible to finish. Too much evidence, an overabundance of clues.

If Hime-chan did hold some significance for this thoroughly unrealistic school, then it wasn’t for her skill or intelligence–but maybe for some other secret psychic art she possessed. Something that could indeed compare with the “Tactics Expert,” the “Dark Knife,” and with “Zigzag the Spider.”

“Hm.”

Well, how about we fail to rejoin Aikawa and end up in dire straits when our escape route is blocked by Shiogi Hagihara, or Yuma Shisei, or Tamamo Saijo–how about a grand finale where at the last possible second, Ichihime Yukariki saves us by unveiling the secret ability she’s been hiding this whole time?

“Hime-chan’s been an ESPer all along!”

“Wh-Whuuut?! Totally unexpected! We’re saved!”

“But I can’t fully control my power…oh no, Master!”

“What’s happening?! My right hand is Hannibal?! My shoelaces are radiating a green aura?!”

…

Fine, I’ll never be a novelist.

An introvert who doesn’t even have any imagination–is there any reason to go on living?

And now back to our regularly scheduled story. Ahem. At any rate, Aikawa was likely still hiding something from me. And probably Hime-chan was too. Which was fine, that’s to be expected. I live with all kinds of secrets myself, and I won’t tell them to anyone no matter what. Secrets are only secrets because we keep them secret. All we can ask is for secrets to stay secrets and lies to stay lies–I guess?

If possible, I wanted to remain an outsider till the end. That was the one wish I had no desire to abandon.

As we were crossing some kind of courtyard, I tripped over something. I was

scared shitless that it was a trap, on account of what Hime-chan had been saying, but nothing happened. Apparently I'd just tripped over a stray soccer ball or something that someone had forgotten to put away.

"Gimme a–"

As I went to pick up the ball, my thoughts caught up to my actions. Sumiyuri Academy–Hang 'Em High, by no means a normal school. Would there really be something as banal as a "stray soccer ball" lying around?

I looked down at the ball. It was Tamamo Saijo's severed head.

2

There amid the gloaming it lay: her head, with that choppy haircut, had been chopped off.

However twisted and insane I may be, there was no way I could stay calm. The hand I'd picked *it* up with reflexively let go, and I just stood there, unable to think. I was in utter consternation. Driven to complete distraction. I simply could not comprehend the situation. I stood there in a state of total misapprehension. I couldn't even reprehend myself for my reaction. *It,* which of course made me think of Noa Origami's severed head hanging from the ceiling of the Director's office, had no expression. Tamamo looked like she was asleep, except that from her neck down there was nothing–

"Look out!"

Hime-chan saved me. She hurled herself at my waist as hard as she could to knock me out of the way, and while ordinarily this would've had no effect, Hime-chan being only about half my size, at present there was nobody home, my spirit had left my body, and she easily knocked me to the ground in a repeat of her tackle a few hours earlier.

And a split second later. A crossbow bolt whizzed through the spot where I'd just been standing and pierced the ground with an audible thud.

I took in the situation in an instant, my body temperature below the freezing point. I rolled sideways, holding tight to Hime-chan who was still clutching me about the waist. I was aware of more shafts striking the ground behind me–*zhk zhk zhk*–as I rolled. If I kept rolling in a uniform motion like that, however, the

attacker would be able to anticipate our path and get a bead on us–I needed to mount a counterattack.

Where had the first bolt come from–over there? Judging by their trajectories thus far, I could make a rough guess. Even if our unseen assailant was moving as he or she fired, I could do some anticipating of my own. As I rolled, I picked up a good-sized rock, and changed direction. I watched as the next crossbow bolt struck the ground a little farther off target than the previous ones, then got to my feet and hurled the rock at the point where I estimated the archer to be firing from. With this, the attack ceased.

At length–a single girl materialized out of the surrounding darkness. That long black hair and slender physique, which I couldn't help but be fascinated by–and that black sailor outfit.

"I guess this thing really isn't much good if you're not proficient with it…" Muttering this, she cast the crossbow aside. She must've run out of ammo with that last shot. "It is I, Shiogi Hagihara. So we meet again."

"–An unexpected pleasure."

I stood in the line of fire, placing myself between Shiogi and Hime-chan. Ambushed again? It seemed Tamamo's call had gone through after all. She'd seemed slow on the uptake, but maybe she'd been a good team player.

But what did it mean that a piece of that selfsame Tamamo was lying on the ground out here?

"I'm pleased to've taken you unawares, but I'd hoped for a more successful surprise attack. My stratagem doesn't seem to be going according to plan–and that rarely if ever happens. Who are you, really?"

That last question was directed at me, but–that was my line. *What the hell is*

this place? Three short hours ago I'd come upon the dismembered body and suspended head of the Director, and now I was stumbling over the severed head of a teenage girl. And, in between those two events, my life had been imperiled multiple times.

A warzone.

The word that had occurred to me the first time I faced off against Shiogi floated through my mind once more. Tamamo had tried to kill me, so it's not like there was any love lost between the two of us, nor friendship, nor sympathy–but looking at her head, severed as if someone had simply said, *Time's running out, so let's end this*…

"Does it–mean something that this is here?"

"It's meaningless to wonder about what it means. I always select the best, most suitable strategy, that's all. Then again…" And here Shiogi shook her head in consternation, and it didn't seem like an act. Her head, which at present was still attached to her body. "Thanks to the appearance of Overkill Red, the majority of the students are quaking in their boots, and as a result they're useless to me–so the best, most suitable strategy was off the table. But the second best, perfectly adequate strategy seems to have worked, so all's well that ends well."

She was talking like it was a done deal.

It was checkmate, no question. The checkmate after the masterstroke. Not a single crossbow bolt had found its mark, but through that attack she'd confirmed that Jun Aikawa wasn't hiding nearby. Shiogi had probably only half intended to actually hit us in the first place–and if it was just me and Hime-chan, the tactics expert could easily take us with nothing but her bare hands.

“Hide-and-seek time is over–”

We were cornered…

There was nothing we could do…we were utterly defeated. We’d been unable to slip through Shiogi’s iron cordon.

A battle of wits–but I felt okay about losing this way.

If this was how it ended, that wasn’t so bad.

Keeping Hime-chan safe was always going to be beyond me. That was Jun Aikawa’s role, after all. What a shame, Mr. Nonsense User.

“Now then.”

Well, I would at least try and do a good job of begging for my life.

That much at least–was well within my capabilities.

I took a step forward, and so did Shiogi–at which point Hime-chan inserted herself between us.

Spreading her arms wide, she formed a tiny wall in front of me. It was a truly tiny, fragile wall–but I understood full well what she intended by it.

“Uh, uh uh uh–”

Hime-chan was shaking like a leaf, but she didn’t move from that spot. She stayed, to protect me.

“…”

Seeing this, Shiogi stopped. Then she let out an exasperated sigh and said, “Please give up this pointless resistance, Yukariki. I don’t recall teaching you to fight losing battles. Even you can comprehend that right now, here in this place, you have no hope of staying my hand, can’t you?”

“I,” Hime-chan answered Shiogi in a quivering but resolute voice, “won’t know unless I try.”

“The idea that you wouldn’t know that unless you try it–is pretty foolish.”

“Uh huh. And, that’s fine,” Hime-chan said. “Better to be stupid like me than clever like you.”

Ah.

I’d.

Been such an idiot.

Ichihime Yukariki–was friends with Jun Aikawa.

But why would that mean she had to have special abilities, or mutant powers?

Why would she need that kind of qualification?

She had wept out of concern for me.

She had frantically restrained me.

She had come after me.

She had saved my life.

And–she had smiled at me.

She was no washout.

Hime-chan.

You’re–a magnificent human being.

Fit to stand shoulder to shoulder with the world’s strongest.

“Goddammit–what a riot.”

In which case, fine.

I'll keep on pretending we're friends a little longer.

I feel good, really good. Really, really good.

Right now–I feel incredibly good.

So good that if I let my mask slip, I might laugh out loud.

"Hime-chan…you can get back on your own, right?" I whispered. "You followed me on your own, so you can get back to that room on your own, right?"

"Master? Whats are you saying?"

She looked genuinely confused.

Guess I was going to have to spell it out.

"I'm saying–*get out of here and leave this to me.*"

If ever there was a time to divide our forces, it was now. This was not selfishness or cowardice on my part–it was strategy. You don't mind, do you, Shiogi? If as a tactician you're okay with *that* happening to Tamamo–then I'll also shed the role of the nonsense user.

From here on out it's not a battle of wits.

It's a fight to the death.

I'll kill you, tear you apart, line you up, put you back together–and hang you out to dry.

"But, Master…"

"And one belated correction. Even if I couldn't ever become friends with Aikawa, some small part of me wishes I could. I realized that just now. So your

name for me is horribly on point… It's definitely, definitively appropriate for a vague, half-assed person like myself, in all its ironic glory. And that being the case–" I glanced down at Hime-chan for a brief moment, but couldn't see her expression. "Don't you think it's a little funny for a disciple to be ignoring her master's wishes?"

Hime-chan–Ichihime Yukariki–nodded, and the moment she'd come to this decision, she took off running.

"Wait!"

During the instant when this surprise was registering on Shiogi's face, I charged. *Strike first and you need only strike once*–it was nothing so strategically minded. I was just trying to buy enough time for Hime-chan to get away. However much of a "tactician" Shiogi Hagihara might be–she would still have no choice but to react to impending danger. It's an uncontrollable innate reflex of the human animal. To get around it, you'd have to possess motor functions quicker than your reflexes, like Mr. No Longer Human–but unfortunately, Shiogi was, physically, a normal human girl.

"–hk!"

She avoided my attack by a hair's breadth, and in so doing retreated three steps, putting some extra distance between us. We now stood at what they call "the nine-step gap" in kendo. Plenty close enough for hostility, but a little far to actually fight each other.

Shiogi watched reluctantly as Hime-chan faded into the surrounding darkness, then let out a sigh. "I really don't understand it… How do you keep throwing off my calculations? I can't anticipate your actions at all. You're like a living quantum uncertainty principle. It's almost as if you have no objective of your own, and you're just tormenting me for fun."

Objective? Oh yeah…hadn't Tamamo asked me about that as well? Though now I could give a very definite answer to that question.

"My objective is to help Hime-chan get the hell out of this place. Or let me gussy that up a little: think of it as an early graduation ceremony."

"That attitude suits you much better. Than tossing around your usual frivolous nonsense."

Shiogi seemed positively smug, despite the fact that she'd let Hime-chan (her "objective") slip through her fingers. Despite the fact that her strategy had been twisted into scrap. This was a somewhat different Shiogi than the one I'd encountered five hours earlier.

"I suppose I should expect no less from Overkill Red's partner."

"Partner? Whoa there. I'm just a decoy who got roped into this by circumstances beyond my control. I wonder if she could ever even have a partner… That would require someone to be her equal, and who could ever be the equal of the world's strongest?"

"The equal of the world's strongest is the world's weakest. And decoy? Come on, did they just finalize the Nonsense Reversion Treaty or something? No one's going to believe that someone with the rare talent to infiltrate Hang 'Em High so easily and make contact with Ichihime Yukariki–that someone like you, who was able to create an opening in the impregnable defenses of Hang 'Em High for the Red Dread to slip in, is a mere decoy."

"…"

Is that why–Aikawa used me for this job? Was her plan always to get herself inside, to send me in as the advance guard? That would add up. But that's all it would do.

“You’re giving me too much credit. I toldja, didn’t I? It was all just dumb luck.”

“That would certainly give me peace of mind, but…since you don’t seem to have realized it on your own, let me explain it to you as a parting gift on your journey to hell.”

“A parting gift on my journey to hell? Nice turn of phrase, I like that. Personally, I love hell.”

“…*That talent* of yours is extremely dangerous. The world around you just goes crazy without you ever having to lift a finger… Or maybe I should I call it ‘whatever will be, will be bad’–nature taking its worst possible course? Ringing any bells? Abnormal situations always breaking out around you, bizarre characters always gravitating to you?”

“Rings a bell, yeah.”

In fact, it rings the whole carillon. I’d take that to heart, if I thought I had one of those.

“You’re an accident-prone superior deviant magnet, to stick to everyday language. Or to put it more simply, a troublemaker… In this case, the fact that you have no objective and no intentionality is a huge nuisance.”

For a tactician like myself, she continued.

“Which is why for the sake of brevity, *we* refer to annoyingly irreducible equations like you as ‘non-actors.’”

A non-factoring system, a formula for non-entity–an absolute equation whose very existence is more of an infraction than any null set or a conscious one like Hitoshiki.

“Totally. You and I may be similar, but insofar as you’ve been given an objective, and I refuse to accept even the objective I’ve been given, turns out

we're completely different after all. If you're a tactician–I guess I'd have to be a charlatan."

"Is that so?" Shiogi closed her eyes and nodded. "Well then, we cancel each other out. Violently."

The prefatory remarks were concluded, and Shiogi slid forward one step, then another. I waited for her without taking any stance. She seemed a little wary of this, but that didn't stop her from continuing her advance until she'd closed the distance to what they call "the one-step-one-sword gap" in kendo, and then–

"Time out."

I called time out.

At which Shiogi's shoulders slumped.

"Y-You–"

"Don't misunderstand me. I never said I wanted to be your enemy."

"What, do you mean?" asked Shiogi, cautiously retreating from me once more. "What other option is there under the circumstances?"

"Betrayal," I responded shamelessly, not displaying an ounce of fear or trepidation, acting just as she'd done when she announced to Aikawa that she was going to run away.

"Be…trayal?"

"Yup. Upon consideration, it wouldn't make for much of a match between us, you being a second *dan* in kendo and all. Doesn't seem like I'd be able to get away if I ran, either…which just leaves 'betrayal,' right?"

Silver tongue–golden voice.

"When you say 'betrayal'…what exactly are you proposing?"

“I’ll tell you where Hime-chan just ran off to, the same place where Jun Aikawa is hiding.”

“Immorality, huh? Even if I don’t enter into that bargain,” Shiogi looked me over with that appraising look of hers, “I can just break a bone or two and force you to tell me anyway.”

“That’s not gonna work, Shiogi. Not even the itty-bittiest chance. Because I swear to you right now that if you do that to me I’m just going to lie. And I’ll tell you upfront, I’m one hell of a liar.”

“I’m pretty confident I can make you tell the truth.”

“But there’s still that flicker of doubt, isn’t there. To put it your way, I’m Jun Aikawa’s equal, right? Not to mention, my ‘betrayal’ here means a lot more than just acquiring some info. As a tactician, I’m sure you understand. Funnily enough, it’s something you said yourself… ‘Overkill Red is soft on her friends.’ It’s true, Aikawa didn’t go after you earlier, did she? And being soft on your friends means being weak against your friends–or am I wrong?”

“Suppose I injured you,” Shiogi said as if she were just confirming something, “Jun Aikawa would vent her rage on me. If you’d ‘betrayed’ her, however–”

Trust is sad. Which is precisely why betrayal is painful.

“It would create an opening a tactician like yourself could exploit.”

“And…what do you get out of this bargain other than ‘avoiding immediate injury’?”

“Honestly I don’t give a shit. I mean, up until a minute ago I really did intend to take you on so that Hime-chan could get away–as a special treat to myself. But upon reflection, it’s not like I really have anything against you. I mean, an inhuman person who doesn’t think of people as people–now that’s my type.”

“…!”

Shiogi seemed startled at my words, and took a step back. This was a little unexpected, since I’d been sure she’d have a logical counterargument, but not being one to miss an opening just because I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, I pressed on.

“I may be a non-important non-actor, but you’re not so different yourself, you’re not acting for your own sake either. Neither of us chooses our own objectives. There are differences, sure, but there are also similarities. We’re birds of a feather. Listen, Shiogi. I love virtuous, unselfish, noble types–and I have no desire to be enemies with someone who’s caught my fancy… In fact, I’d like to be on the best terms possible.”

“Are you saying,” Shiogi paused for the span of one breath in uncharacteristic bewilderment, before continuing, “that you’ve conceived a personal love for me, Shiogi Hagihara?”

“…”

Not quite, which is to say not at all…but whatever. It was probably just her strategic style as a tactician anyway. In which case I might as well take my own style and run with it. No, not just run with it. Run her through with it.

“You’re free to interpret that however you want. And naturally, this ‘betrayal’…or what did you call it, ‘bargain’? Doesn’t matter. Either way, this is a battle between tactician and charlatan, a continuation of a showdown where we’re not putting anything in writing. For all you know this is all just part of my charlatanry. If you’re not confident you can beat that with your ‘tactics’–then you don’t have to go along with it. Go ahead and break an arm, a leg, whatever you like. I won’t put up a fight.”

“…”

For a while, Shiogi pretended to agonize over it–this time her performance was totally transparent, which was uncharacteristic indeed. Then for another while, she stared at me long and hard. Finally she said, “Okay–if you think you can deceive me, Mr. Charlatan, go ahead and deceive me to your heart’s content,” and proffered her left hand.

“You don’t have to tell me twice. Deceiving and being deceived are both specialties of mine. Especially with girls who’re my type.” I put out my right hand.

“…” “Heehee.”

Shiogi Hagihara laughed, almost the way a high school girl her age might laugh.

Act Six

END OF THE LINE

ICHIHIME YUKARIKI
The Client

0

The liar is the end of humanity.

1

And so it transpired that I betrayed Aikawa and Hime-chan–but what was actually going on? I mean, obviously, for my part, it was a stratagem to get myself out of that situation without the need for violence, but “now”–by which I mean now that I was traipsing through a totally unfamiliar school building with Shiogi, nominally guiding her to Aikawa’s hiding place–things had reached a truly half-cocked state.

By which I mean that at the present moment, I could go either way. I could continue leading Shiogi on a wild goose chase, or I could lead her to the Director’s office, where Hime-chan was heading, and where abideth Aikawa. If I wanted to betray them, I could betray them, and if I wanted to stand by them, I could stand by them. I was faced with the ultimate binary choice.

Though that said–

“Will it turn out the same, no matter which I choose?”

“Did you say something?”

“No, I didn’t say anything.”

“More importantly, are you sure they’re in this building? It seemed like Yukariki ran off in a completely different direction.”

“That was a ruse. Hime-chan knew I was about to screw her over.”

“Hmm…I see.”

The fact that I was waffling so much even though it was all too clear what lay ahead–had to do with Shiogi. I’d succeeded at rounding off her sharper edges and inveigling her to join me, but since then her attitude had been oddly formal. We were strangers, so maybe that was only natural, but nevertheless, something about it felt unnatural.

Then there was the question of Tamamo. Tamamo, killed so ruthlessly then used as a tool. And at present I was walking along beside the person who had so used her. It wasn’t like I’d been about to fall for Tamamo or anything, but still.

And the murder of the Director–could I assume Shiogi was indeed the culprit? At the moment, at least, I had my doubts. Noa Origami who, like Tamamo–no, far more horribly than Tamamo, had been dismembered, her head suspended from the ceiling. If that had been the tactician’s mutiny, then was Shiogi Hagihara, walking here beside me, playing me for a fool? Did she, as a tactician, in fact know everything only to keep silent about it?

I just couldn’t be sure.

Phew. I was tired of thinking. It was too much of a pain in the ass, maybe I should actually go ahead and become a traitor? Shiogi and I seemed on track to becoming friends, and battling Aikawa seemed like it could be interesting. Ally or enemy, with Aikawa it seemed more or less the same either way. And Shiogi’s hair was really pretty. I wonder if she’d be mad if I touched it.

“What are you staring at? It’s impolite.”

Shiogi had stopped walking and was looking back at me dubiously. She seemed to have picked up on my bloodlust (if that’s what it was). I didn’t want to ruin her impression of me at this point. Beginnings are the crux of any relationship.

“Nothing, sorry. Nothing at all.”

“Really?”

“Really. That is, Shiogi…”

I almost said, *Your hair is really pretty,* but stopped myself just in time. This was Shiogi we were talking about, she probably got that kind of compliment so often that she was sick to death of hearing it by now. In which case there was a good chance she would ignore me, plus there was the danger that she’d decide I was a total waste of space. In which case I needed to come at it from a different angle.

“Yes?”

“Your breasts are really big.”

All of a sudden Shiogi was flat on her back with her legs up in the air, like in a cartoon.

It was the first time I’d ever seen someone do that in real life.

When she got back up, her entire face was bright red and she was staring daggers at me. She kept opening and closing her mouth but couldn’t get anything out, and in the end she gave up and strode off quickly down the hall, her pretty hair streaming behind her. Hm, I’d blown it (but at least I’d tried).

Oh well. Giving up is the crux of any relationship.

“That reminds me,” Shiogi said after she’d proceeded in silence for a while, “I still don’t know your name. It’s inconvenient not to have something to call you, so if you wouldn’t mind, I’d appreciate it if you’d tell it to me.”

“Ah. The thing is, until now I’ve only told my real name to–”

I.

Began to answer, glancing casually out the hallway window as I did so. At present we were on the second floor, so we weren’t all that high up–which is exactly why. Exactly why I was able to catch sight of Ichihime Yukariki walking unsteadily through the garden between the buildings.

“…”

What was she doing there? Even if the faculty building wasn’t close by and took a while to reach…why should she be skulking around here, way off target? I only caught a glimpse of her before she slipped into the shadow of the trees and was out of sight–but there was no mistaking who it was.

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, um…um.”

She couldn’t have come back out of concern for me again, could she? Only to find that we were no longer in the courtyard–was she trying to find out where Shiogi and I had gone?

What–a pain in the ass. What a fucking busybody. Even if Shiogi was right that I was a magnet for weirdoes, freaks, and crazies, no one could be that worried about someone who was basically a stranger. I specifically told her to leave this to me. How similar did she have to be to “her” before she’d be satisfied, fer chrissakes… I started to get kind of pissed off.

“I, uh, just wanted to know your name.”

“Right. My name…my name, my name…”

Shiogi hadn’t noticed Hime-chan yet. When she did, she’d be liable to leap right out the window. She had no real reason to face Jun Aikawa. Hime-chan hadn’t noticed us, either. If she had, she wouldn’t be dilly-dallying down there.

In which case…in which case it was time to carry on with the charlatanry.

“Okay, let’s make it a guessing game.” I turned to face Shiogi such that my body was blocking the window. “I’ll give you some hints, and you try to figure out my name.”

“Ooh. Sounds fun. I love games like that.”

Of course I didn’t tell her that I hate them.

“How many hints do I get?”

“Three. You can ask me three questions. No restrictions, except you can’t ask me my name or anything like that.”

“Hmmm. Okay, challenge accepted.”

Whereupon Shiogi lapsed into thought.

Lapsed into thought and forgot all about Hime-chan.

“Okay, QUESTION ①. Tell me all your nicknames.”

“Nicknames?”

“Yukariki called you ‘Master,’ and Overkill Red called you ‘Iitan,’ right? That kind of thing.”

“Gotcha. Up till now I’ve been called ‘Master’ and ‘Iitan,’ as you know, plus ‘Ikkun,’ ‘The Big I,’ ‘Ii-Bro,’ ‘Iino,’ ‘Inosuke,’ ‘Nonsense User,’ and ‘Charlatan.’”

“Those are all such lame terms of endearment… So the ‘I’ is the key, huh?”

“Is that one of your questions?”

“No, just thinking out loud. But why does Yukariki call you ‘Master’?”

“Good question…I’d love to know the answer myself. Because she’s the nonsense user’s disciple, I guess?”

“Huh… Anyway, next question. When you write your name in roman letters, how many vowels and consonants are there, respectively?”

Wow. It may have only been a diversion to distract Shiogi’s attention from Hime-chan, but I was kind of impressed. She really made her questions count, as befits a tactician. It was a cunning way to get around asking me point-blank how many characters there were in my name.

“Eight vowels, and seven consonants.”

“Hm. Interesting. On to my final question. If you convert the kana in your name into numbers, with ‘a’ being ‘1,’ ‘i’ being ‘2,’ ‘u’ being ‘3’…and ‘n’ being ‘46,’ what’s the sum?”

Checkmate. Man, her wheels turn fast.

“134.”

“That’s a pretty strange name you’ve got,” Shiogi giggled.

“Who knows, maybe it’s an alias. Since I pride myself on the fact that I’ve only ever told my real name to one other person.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. And while your guess is probably correct, you’d better not call me by that name. Only three people ever have, and none of them are still alive.”

“Only…three?”

“One was Harukana Ii. My little sister. She died in a head-on collision between two airplanes. One was Tomo Kunagisa. My friend. She’s alive but not alive, dead but not dead. And one was Magokoro Omokage. She…well, what would you call it. Her whole body was a playground for human experimentation, at the end of which she burned to death in a roaring conflagration.”

“Because she called you by your name?”

“That’s how I see it.”

“In that case, what shall I call you?”

“Whatever strikes your fancy…”

As I said this, I glanced out the window. Good, Hime-chan was gone. I didn’t even see any indication that she was hiding somewhere. She’d seemingly managed to get away safely.

What was I doing? I was in limbo: I’d helped Hime-chan get away “for now,” despite not even being able to decide whether I was going to betray her and Aikawa or stick by them, but now what the hell was I going to do? It was a real conundrum. And I was blabbing to Shiogi about all this personal stuff.

Dredging up three unpleasant memories at once. Things I’d worked so hard to forget.

No.

Who was I kidding? I hadn’t forgotten them.

I didn’t need to dredge them up, they were always on my mind.

“Oh, right. Excuse me for a moment.”

From her breast pocket, Shiogi produced the same kind of cell phone-looking walkie-talkie thing Tamamo had been carrying and used it to contact someone.

“Uh huh–yes. Currently enacting the next phase of the strategy–I’ve acquired a ‘collaborator.’ Yes, please leave it to me, current location is…”

A status report? The bidirectionality of information transmission is important, so of course that would be necessary. If soldiers on the battlefield were left to their own devices to go every which way they pleased, the war would never get off the ground.

But with the Director dead, who could she be talking to? A member of the faculty? Or the infamous “Zigzag”–

“Roger that, Director. Signing off,” Shiogi said as she ended transmission.

I–naturally didn’t let my shock show on my face. But internally I was a maelstrom of confusion. Why do you have to give me even more to think about? What you just said, who the hell were you addressing?

Did this mean that someone else was calling herself the Director–or no, that conversation just now could’ve been an act Shiogi put on for my benefit, but why would she need to do that?

In which case Shiogi couldn’t be the culprit–since she didn’t know that the Director was dead. Come to think of it, I’d decided she was behind it based on essentially nothing. There was no real evidence, I’d just thought it might be her since Tamamo’s head had been chopped off, same as the Director’s. But now that I really thought about it–

“Shiogi. It’s my turn to ask a question… Did you kill Tamamo Saijo?”

“Huh?” She looked truly taken aback. “Why would I, Shiogi Hagihara, need to kill my own comrade?”

“I mean…with her head in the courtyard like that…”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t possess that kind of *technique.* Only ‘Zigzag’ could

pull it off.”

A-ha. Speaking of, the wounds on the Director’s and Tamamo’s necks had been different. The Director’s had been horribly rough–while the plane of Tamamo’s neck where the head had been severed was incredibly smooth. Was this what Hime-chan was talking about–“Zigzag,” the weaver? A lunatic who could use those filaments, which for me amounted to nothing more than a rope for rappelling, as a tool of murder–

“It’s absurd to imagine that I’d kill my comrade. I used a head I found lying in the courtyard as part of my subsequent stratagem, that’s all.”

“…”

Not sure what to think about that, either. Maybe that’s just how it is with “tacticians,” but Shiogi did seem to be lacking some element of human compassion. That may well be attributable to the influence of Hang ’Em High, but it seemed to me there also had to be some deeper issue with Shiogi herself.

But precisely because she was that kind of tactician–it was undeniably true that she’d never pointlessly kill her comrade and decrease the number of “pawns” at her disposal. Just as a shogi player would never ignore her knights, even if they aren’t particularly useful.

In other words, “Zigzag” was the antithesis of a tactician, closer to Tamamo than Shiogi–a berserker?

What did that mean? For the locked-room question. And the dismemberment question. Judging from the wounds, the Director’s murder was not the work of “Zigzag.” The culprit was someone else. I’d suspected Shiogi–but if she hadn’t killed Tamamo, then my basis for that suspicion was pretty thin. And there was no reason to suspect Tamamo of the Director’s murder, since she’d been killed

now too.

So was the culprit a member of the “faculty” after all? Speaking of which, it was seriously suspicious that none of them had poked their noses out yet. If one of them was pretending to be the Director and still manipulating Shiogi and her crew–if Shiogi the Tactician of *all* people was being manipulated like a marionette, her head suspended from a string…

Embroiling me, and Shiogi, and Hime-chan and Tamamo, and even Jun Aikawa…

In something as stupid as a power struggle within the school? A proxy war? Something with not even a glimmer of hope for success. Not in the culprit’s wildest dreams–and. Did she really think she was going to get away with it?

Maybe it was time–to take this puppet master down a notch.

“Are you all right? You got so quiet all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s a hobby of mine to get quiet all of a sudden. By the way, Shiogi, mind if we play another game? Do you read detective novels at all?”

“Why would I?” Shiogi cocked her head in confusion.

“I mean…to pass the time, or to study, or…”

“Using books to study, hah… Katai Tayama says, ‘We can derive much greater inspiration from living people than we can from books.’”

“It’s cool that you aren’t even quoting from *Throw Out Your Books,* but you actually read Tayama?”

“Sure. Doesn’t every high school student?”

Apparently.

“Okay then, Quiz Time. How about this scenario…”

Without letting on that it had actually happened (and of course not telling her that Hime-chan and I were involved), I told Shiogi all about the locked-room murder and the Director's dismemberment. About the strictly controlled iron door, the corpse within, the body parts, the suspended head. Top floor, double locks on the windows. The one-way ventilation shaft.

"That one's pretty simple," said Shiogi. "Doesn't make for much of a quiz."

"Simple, eh?" Of course, I'd posed this question to Shiogi not only to get her opinion, but also to see if she had any kind of reaction to it, on the off chance that she was in fact the culprit. But as far as I could tell, she wasn't flustered. She just wore the disappointed expression of someone who was hoping for a challenge. "Okay then, let's hear the solution."

"The door was never locked in the first place," answered Shiogi, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "From what you said, they assumed that the door was locked from the start, but no one ever actually tried it out, right? They just assumed it was a locked room when in fact it wasn't."

Someone had said something like that earlier, hadn't they? *When you decide that it's a locked room, there are two possibilities. Either it is a locked room, or it isn't.* Interesting–just because something appears to be a locked room doesn't mean it necessarily is. What a hackneyed trick.

When you try to cover up a lie with another lie, the first lie is instead laid bare. In which case starting with a single massive lie obviates the need for any follow-ups–was that it? If the door was "just closed" all along and not locked, then *literally anyone* could have killed the Director. Which would mean we'd jumped the gun in determining that it was a locked room–

"No, that's wrong."

If it were just me and Hime-chan who'd discovered the body, I'd have no problem accepting Shiogi's solution as the correct one. But there was someone else: Jun Aikawa. No way she could've made such an elementary mistake.

"Really? Then–yeah. That room wasn't necessarily the scene of the crime. After dismembering the body, the culprit tossed the pieces in from the next room through some opening–through the ventilation shaft, maybe. Through it, for instance, she'd be able to tie the severed head to the lights without ever entering the room."

"But the ventilation shaft can only be opened from inside the room."

"Which is why it's just a *for instance.* Even if it wasn't the ventilation shaft, the culprit surely would've been able to find some passage, some opening that a chopped-up corpse could fit through. A garbage chute, or a drainage pipe or something."

"I dunno…"

"Or they just had a master key."

That, too, was a solution that didn't require any courage, or hope, or dreams…but maybe it's crazy to look for such things in a person's demise.

It felt like a total dead end. I needed a helping hand. I wondered idly how Hime-chan would mangle that expression.

"Hm?" Something. Was on the tip of my brain. "Well, forget the quiz. Sorry it was so lame. But seriously, this is one weird school, huh…"

"Is it? I really like it."

"You don't think about what it might be like if you'd had a normal life?"

"What other life would let me put my skills as a tactician to such good use?"

smiled Shiogi, undaunted. “Same as there aren’t many places where your ‘non-action’ would come in handy–which reminds me. I wanted to ask, did you go to a normal high school?”

“Nope. I didn’t even finish my compulsory education. After that…” She probably knew about ER3, but maybe it was best not to mention it. “I got my GED, and now I’m a freshman at Rokumeikan University.”

“Is that the truth?”

“I’m not lying to you. I’m just not telling you everything.”

“When you’re trying to deceive someone, doesn’t that amount to the same thing?”

This was a conversation fit for a tactician and a charlatan, regardless of time or place or circumstance. Lying, deceiving, dissembling, misrepresenting, bullshitting, falsifying, prevaricating. Dammit, it was like we weren’t even having the same conversation.

“Do you have dreams for the future, Shiogi?”

“Dreams, no. The future holds only reality for me. So if I can manage to keep on like this until I ‘graduate,’ I think I’ll probably get a job with Rule.”

“Get a job, sure… Who do you think you’re kidding? Where does that lead, to becoming Zhuge Liang? Or Hannibal? I gotta say, I think a girl’s happiness lies elsewhere.”

“Whoa. That’s a horribly outdated opinion. What, are you telling me to become a housewife?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying it’s clear that if you go *somewhere like that,* you’ll end up unhappy. Which is your prerogative… Ultimately you’re the only one who’ll ever know what happiness means for you–but more

importantly.” As we went up the stairs to the top floor and walked the halls, I asked Shiogi another question, stalling pointlessly. Though that said, it was something I really did want to ask her, something that interested me. “If I really am leading you to where Aikawa is right now, what do you intend to do? I don’t believe for a second that a tactician like yourself would challenge humanity’s strongest without some kind of plan, but I also don’t think there’s any trick you can pull against a one-woman Dirty Dozen like her.”

Relying on some kind of material superiority won’t work against Aikawa. And you certainly can’t get to her with underhandedness or unfairness. Even this charlatan can’t come up with a single way of hurting her. As I said to Shiogi, Aikawa might have the good grace to be a little shocked if she found out I’d “betrayed” her, but she’d quickly transform it into positive energy. That’s how mighty she is.

“Trick, no–stratagem, yes,” said Shiogi, nonetheless brimming with confidence. “Overkill Red may be *the world’s strongest contractor,* but that doesn’t make her *the world’s strongest person*–and that’s what I’m going to exploit.”

“Hmm.”

“My opponent may be the world’s strongest, but my name is Shiogi Hagihara. The Devil himself has to take a number to see me. I don’t play fair, so watch as I make a surprise attack from plain sight.”

What did that mean, was she planning to outwit Aikawa? Was she looking for a back door? That woman doesn’t have any doors at all, let alone a weak point or any inconsistencies, so it seemed like a pretty tall order–

And that’s when I realized. Of course. That locked room. My thoughts returned to it. That’s right, no matter how–I mean it, no matter

how–meticulously the culprit set up that locked-room scenario, the opposing force was Jun Aikawa. Jun Aikawa has no weak points, no inconsistencies–and for her, nothing is impossible or incredible. Only illogical. Faced with some outdated locked-room mystery, Jun Aikawa's your woman. Whether the truth turns out to be that "the door wasn't actually locked" or something else, it doesn't make a difference. Nothing gets by Jun Aikawa.

And yet, Aikawa had yet to unravel anything.

"How…"

How can that be? Isn't that the most illogical thing of all? For humanity's strongest to stumble at such a low hurdle has to mean that someone's cheating. A master detective who can't solve the case, a serial killer who doesn't kill people, a nonsense user who acts on behalf of strangers–the whole thing was positively overflowing with contradictions.

And if so–no, *precisely because it's so.* Shouldn't that dismembered corpse yield an obvious answer? The body of Noa Origami, chopped up with a chainsaw–*zigzagged.*

Reconstruction…approximate expression…adaptation…and finally compilation.

Then, my thoughts arrived at something even more important. At a deception so overpowering that something on the order of a locked room vanished into obscurity. Working backward from the solution, I arrived at something more fundamental.

Shiogi's response when I'd asked her about the truth behind Tamamo's death.

Don't be ridiculous. I don't possess that kind of technique*. Only "Zigzag" could pull it off*–that *"Don't be ridiculous."*

As if I'd muddled something she took it for granted I should know. Come to think of it, Tamamo had sounded that way too. If the dissonance there, if the *significance* of our crossed wires–was that *there was no such student* as Yuma Shisei–

If.

I already knew Zigzag–if I considered not why I hadn't realized, but why I couldn't have realized, then–the lies.

Deception.

"I-It can't be."

This wasn't my voice, but Shiogi's. She'd stopped somewhere behind me–and had turned as white as a sheet. Her eyes were vacant. She looked aghast–despairing. Confused by this sudden change that had come over her, my thought process ground to a halt.

"What's wrong, Shiogi?"

"Th-That quiz–was it about the Director?"

"–!"

Fierce regret. Damn–she'd figured it out.

Of course she had. If someone like me could arrive at a given "solution," there was no reason why Shiogi Hagihara, the best tactician at this academy, couldn't get there too. And I was the one who'd given her the necessary materials to do so. Working backwards from her own words, and from my attitude and that less-than-innocent quiz–she'd figured out that there had been an incident, and what that incident was. Inverse operation was the tactician's forte, not the charlatan's. No matter how many times I'd reminded myself that this girl was an expert–I had still underestimated her. To be able to figure it all out from such

scant information.

What a mind.

A mind so misfortunate, it made me want to cry.

“Bu–no way. The Director–the walkie-talkie.”

Moving like a revenant, a sort of half-smile on her face. With tottering steps, devoid of her usual flowing grace–Shiogi came towards me. Almost as if she was looking to me for salvation. As if she wanted me to take her in my arms.

I was unsure of what to do. Lie? If I lied to her now, would she buy it? Even if I’d succeeded at manipulating her movements, could I manipulate this truth that Shiogi had discovered? No, it wasn’t a question of whether or not I could–it was a question of whether or not I would.

Would I lie to her more than I already had?

Even if it wasn’t nonsense.

“Tell me…is my–” Shiogi paused, barely able to catch her breath. “Is my *mother*–”

“Yeah. She was murdered, a good long while ago.”

The charlatan didn’t lie.

2

But the real shock to Shiogi in fact came a moment later.

Whum whum whum, a dull sound like the hum of an engine rent the air–and Shiogi's right hand, with which she was about to grab me by the front of my blouse–

Shhhk

detached from her arm at the wrist, like a piece falling off a toy. The hand itself, having lost its fulcrum, went spinning comically through the air until it landed on the floor of the dim, unlit hallway with a thud.

"Uh."

Shiogi stared at her severed hand in astonishment. Then looked down at her right arm, which now came to an abrupt end just below the wrist. She didn't scream. And she managed to choke back her tears. Her eyes continued past her arm–and she turned to look behind her.

It was too dark to see anything. A deep, disturbing blackness. Out of which materialized a girl in a black uniform–

"Guess the jigs are up–"

Along with these words.

"Ms. Jun was right–we all get 'caught in our own webs.' Really, truly, what a

washout, this was unanticipated, there were just too many unexpected elements–there was Hagihara, and Saijo, and then there was you, Master: totally unanticipated. I figured Ms. Jun might bring help, but…never in a million years did I think it'd be *someone like you.*"

With a melancholy smile–Ichihime Yukariki took the stage.

"Nh, guh–"

Regardless of the fact that her hand had been lopped off–Shiogi charged at Hime-chan without hesitation. And she did so regardless of the fact that the distance between them was not the prescribed nine steps, but much farther. At that long range–she was no match for Hime-chan.

For Zigzag.

Hime-chan shook her head gently, as if to say, "guess I've got no choice," and revealed *her hands, encased in a pair of black gloves.*

"We all get 'caught in our own webs'–although…"

She performed that little conductor-like movement of hers.

Whipping her finger up, hungrily–and snapping it back down with finality.

"This time you're caught in mine. This is the end of your plans, Shiogi, I'm cutting you off."

Whum–even as I wondered if I'd actually heard the sound, Shiogi's body froze in midair, but only for a moment, the true blink of an eye–and then her body was slashed into zigzagging pieces, cut up like a jigsaw puzzle. Like a tumbling house of blocks, her head and chest and abdomen and shoulders and arms and hands and fingers and hips and buttocks and legs and feet slid apart in perfect rings, one after another in orderly succession, all formalities observed; the pieces scattered across the floor, and finally, the blood began to spray.

This was my second experience with them, so I was just able to make them out. Those hyper-attenuated “lines” crawling through the air like living things. Making the blood shimmer. Making the darkness shimmer. And there it was again–that *whum whum.*

The sound of Hime-chan reeling in her lines.

“After all, tactics alone can’t contain the Zigzag, *senpai.* If you wanted to survive, your only shot was to disable my hands and feet with a surprise attack, like you did the first time–or else to stage our showdown outside, where I can only use my ‘lines’ directly. You had two chances, and you let them both slip away–and that’s why you lose, Hagihara.”

Then Hime-chan added, *However.*

And continued, “I don’t gets it… Why would a tactician of your caliber waltz right into ‘enemy’ territory like that? You left yourself as open as a high school girl in a teen rom-com… Not that I care.”

When she was finished with this speech, delivered to Shiogi’s severed head where it lay on the ground, Hime-chan turned to me. Treating me to the full radiance of that broad, melancholy grin.

“I feel like I should thank you…but it doesn’t seem like you saved me, does it,” I observed.

“It doesn’t, doesn’t it,” nodded Hime-chan. “It was just that Hagihara figured it out. If possible, Hime-chan didn’t want to kill any of the students–”

“You already killed another one, though. Tamamo.”

“Oh. Right.”

She’d clearly forgotten all about it.

“So I did. Well, witnesses would be a problem.”

Right–Zigzag. When we rappelled down from the school building, she pretended to try and recover her “lines” afterward, but in fact she was just giving a tug on the wire she’d wrapped around Tamamo’s head while we were still up there.

“She’d already contacted Hagihara, though, so I guess it was too late.”

“…Does a little tug have enough force to sever a human head? It’s not like you’re very strong.”

“Of course. Here’s the thing, Master–Hime-chan doesn’t need to be ‘strong.’ Friction. Pressure, attraction, gravity, magnetism. Tension, stress, resistance, elasticity, centrifugal force, centripetal force. Action, reaction, the principle of oscillation and the principle of the pulley. The recoil coefficient and the friction coefficient–our world is filled with forces we can exploit. Hime-chan doesn’t need ‘strength’ of her own–”

And she lightly flicked her finger. It was hard to tell amid the gloom, but there were dozens of “wires” wrapped around those gloves, layer upon layer, layers layered on layers of lower layers, like a puppeteer, very much indeed like an illusionist–

The glass in the window behind me shattered without a sound.

“Killing a person is easy enough.”

Right. That’s the whole point of webs and the weaver.

“You’re quite the washout, Hime-chan. So Zigzag is the name of your technique… I made a misguided assumption about that…a bit of a misunderstanding. Though you really exploited that assumption to the fullest. O, what a tangled web we weave. I must say, you had me completely fooled.”

“I wasn’t fooling you. Though I did lie to you.”

Sure–same thing.

“When I asked you about ‘Zigzag,’ I thought it was weird that you had so much to say. You’d been so evasive about everything else, always insisting you didn’t understand anything.”

Telling me that “Zigzag” used the genuine article…was nothing more than another of Hime-chan’s expedients. Those strings of hers were plenty good enough. In the hands of a master weaver, any string, no matter how fragile, could mean the end of the line.

And her description of the gloves had been an expedient too, with a little half-truth mixed in. Upon consideration, there was no need to wear them around the clock. If you were using the lines for some more pedestrian purpose, it’d be possible to do it barehanded–just as long as you weren’t attempting to kill someone, yup, like right now.

Retreat…was not an option. Since there were likely already “lines” strung haphazardly all through this hallway, like a true spider’s web. Most of them were invisible to the naked eye (she must have intentionally woven in a few you could see with the ones you couldn’t), but I felt pretty confident that they were there. After confirming that we were in this building over the walkie-talkie, Hime-chan headed us off at the pass. She set this trap and lay in wait for us.

This was a zigzagging “cat’s cradle” writ large. Easier said than done, keeping track of the position and tension of every single line, fine-tuning the force of the mediating pulleys, maintaining an awareness of the things that come into contact with the lines, as well as the things that don’t, and furthermore controlling it all with the tip of a finger. Outside was one thing, but inside, where there were as many nooks and crannies as one might need to act as

pulleys for the “lines”–Zigzag was indeed a peerless, and endlessly adaptable, combat technique. No wonder the four girls who tackled her hadn’t even glanced my way. And if I was wondering why Tamamo had lost her concentration and given me my opening, simply at the sound of Hime-chan’s voice–well, here was my answer. With a higher-level berserker making her entrance, Tamamo couldn’t keep her head. And now it made perfect sense that Shiogi had set her ambush in the courtyard. Good visibility was Hime-chan’s Achilles’ heel.

“Hunh, it’s all coming together…”

The moment Shiogi and I set foot on this floor, we were caught in the spider’s web.

“And you killed the Director too, didn’t you.”

“Yes,” she assented as though it was nothing. And then continued as though it was nothing: “The whole Zigzag thing aside, Master, now that you’ve figured thats out, I have to kill you.”

“Because I figured it out? Did you really think that no one would ever discover the truth?”

“I did. I hoped so. I wished its could be that way. I even prayed for it.”

“…”

“I mean, Ms. Jun is soft on her friends. So she would never suspect Hime-chan.”

Jun Aikawa’s sole blind spot.

Not “betrayal,” but “deception.”

That woman–trusts her friends implicitly.

“But that’s just a blind spot, not a weak spot,” Hime-chan said, sounding sad. “Listen…can you understands at all? Do you have any inkling of what kind of life Ms. Jun has led? A world where everyone is deceiving everyone else, where you kill the person standing next to you before deciding what kind of a person they are–that’s the kind of world she’s lived in, seeing only the filthy side of humanity, and yet she still trusts other people without a second thought. Never suspecting Hime-chan, even for a moment.”

Hime-chan seemed to be getting a little choked up, but definitely wasn’t crying. She was staring intently at me like a vigilant guard dog.

“For people like Hime-chan, that’s basically an insult. No matter how special Jun Aikawa is, she tries harder than anyone to be on equal terms with other people. That right there is the essence of being strong, I guess. Hime-chan could never be like that. I even doubted *you* right up till the end, Master. When you said, ‘leave it to me,’ I suspected you might be planning to sell us out.”

So when she came after me, it wasn’t out of concern. Not only that, when she came after me the first time, the time I left the Director’s office, that was just for the sake of risk avoidance. It was all lies, all false.

When she cried for me.

When she restrained me.

When she came after me.

When she saved me.

Even when she smiled for me.

She was just putting on an act, playing the role of the kind of girl I like.

“Buuut,” Hime-chan declared, “other people are unbelievable, aren’t they!”

She laughed, willy-nilly imitating her own pure smile with a forced cheerfulness. Yet it was nothing more than a twisted distortion of her mouth into a warped curve.

“They betray you at the drop of a hat, deceive you, and explain it all away. They dismiss other people without a second thought. They hit other people anytime they feel like it, despite the fact that they know it’ll hurt, precisely because they know it’ll hurt. Basically, everyone–everyone is a fake.”

“Is it lonely, being so alone?”

“Yes, it is,” she answered immediately. “It’s lonely–still, I’ll live my life alone. Betraying, deceiving, and explaining it all away. I’ll lives my life alone.”

“That so… Guess it is, at that.”

“If we keeps on talking I’m going to start feeling sympathetic, so it’s time to bring this to an end.”

And Hime-chan whipped her finger up. In that instant, an unpleasant chill assaulted my body. A-ha, so this was the feeling of having those “lines” coiled all around your body. It all made sense now. In other words, that sensation I felt the very first time I met her back in “Year 2, Class A” was–nothing else. Did I have one foot in the grave from that very first hello? So then I wasn’t hallucinating when I sensed that locker shake, and it also explained why my feet got all tangled up. There must’ve been invisible threads winding through that classroom.

I was dead meat.

That time, because of her wariness at our first encounter.

And now, because I’d learned too much.

“I’ll tell Ms. Jun that Master left ahead of us–or something. Okay, bye-bye.

Time to say farewell, Master.”

“If you’re worried about sympathy, it’s too late for me, you know.”

The finger that was about to snap down for the final time–stopped.

“Did you…says something?”

“I guess this is the first time I’m saying it out loud. You’re…terribly similar. To a girl I destroyed when I was a kid. That girl was openhearted, always smiling, and never suspicious or angry, a real good egg, she’d forgive you for anything, and above all, she was kind enough to love me.”

“Then we’re not similar at all, are we?” Hime-chan muttered, lowering her gaze. With lowered gaze, she muttered, “Hime-chan isn’t a good girl. That’s all superficial. I’m suspicious of everyone, and I’m always annoyed, plus I’ve never once fallen in love. It’s all an act. An act, a pack of lies. I was just playing up to you. That kind of person…doesn’t really exist, do they?”

She wasn’t like her, she’d just acted like it.

Since that kind of person doesn’t really exist.

“Yeah. I thought so too. I told myself that *this kind of person* shouldn’t exist. Which is why–I smashed *that kind of thing* to bits. Goodwill is fake, and trust is counterfeit, so I ruthlessly stomped it all to pieces.”

“…”

“It was incredibly cathartic. The best feeling ever. Just thinking about it makes me feel like the sun’s come out. That must be what people mean when they talk about happiness. And…I fell straight into the jaws of regret. I’d destroyed something authentic and irreplaceable. And that girl wasn’t strong like Aikawa. Being deceived by me, the person she loved, that could only have been the end for her. And I knew it, or should have–”

Why was I waxing on about this?

About my sins.

Was it repentance? Not a chance. Atonement? Not quite.

Yeah–I was just hoping for a do-over, it was that simple.

Because even if Hime-chan coming after me out of concern was a lie, the conversation we had when she did wasn't. Even if her words had been directed at herself instead of me.

Hime-chan had said it was all lies.

And I think that was the truth.

And yet–honestly. Honestly. Honestly, I'm telling you.

If this world were truly just as Hime-chan says it is, just as I think it is.

Then we'd be able to get by without this much suffering.

Don't you see?

If even the way you were trembling when you protected me from Shiogi was an act–if even that was a lie, then this world holds nothing but lies. And if everything's a lie and there's not a shred of truth anywhere–if there's no point of comparison, then that's the same as saying that everything is true.

"Why did you kill the Director?"

"Is the fact that she was the Director of this academy not reason enough? Would you be more satisfied if Hime-chan had been through alls kinds of horrible experiences at her hands? If my friends had been killed? If I'd been raped? If something important had been taken from me? Would that be a thoroughly satisfying, neatly wrapped up happily-ever-after for you? Do you think I'm an idiot? That's not how killing someone works, Master."

I was being lectured about the meaning of murder by a teenage girl. A seventeen-year-old girl, going on about the finer points of crime, and punishment. It was an abnormal situation. So abnormal that it was hard to accept, even within the precincts of the academy known as Hang ’Em High.

“Then let me ask you a different question. Did you kill the Director because you wanted to get out of here? Or did you decide to get out of here as part of your strategy to kill the Director?”

“Both. And neither,” replied Hime-chan coldly. “I wanted to destroy this school. I wanted to pull it up by the roots, to do away with the whole place in one fell swoop so that not a single blade of grass remained, so that not a trace, not an ounce, not a hint of a shadow of a memory was left.”

“When we were first discovered by those two girls, you did that on purpose, didn’t you? That’s why you didn’t tell me anything upfront.”

“That’s right. Since if we succeeded in escaping, we couldn’t go to the Director’s office. And I was pretty sure that was what Ms. Jun would decide to do.”

“And while we were running away, when I had you tucked under my arm, you took the campus map out of my pocket.”

“If you had a map, you wouldn’t be able to gets lost.”

“And you didn’t use Zigzag to dismember the Director because if you had, Aikawa would’ve been on to you.”

“Yup. You might be able to fool insight, but you can’t fool sight.”

“So you fooled her by using a chainsaw to dismember the body instead.”

“It’s like you were rights there in the room with me.”

“And you tricked Shiogi and company by posing as the Director on the walkie-talkie, so you could move them around like chess pieces and get them to do whatever you wanted.”

“Exactly. Though they didn’t do what I wanted, did they.”

“That leaves–well, some puzzles that need solving, but that about covers the preface. So let’s get to the real topic at hand, Hime-chan. Let’s talk about the future.”

“Huh?”

Hime-chan looked at me dubiously. A swirling maelstrom of overpoweringly negative emotions lodged in those pupils of hers. Not like I gave a shit about getting killed, not like it wasn’t a completely futile non-action, I couldn’t care less…

But I would do what I could.

That was–my job.

Everything around me goes insane. Strategies and calculations go off the rails, nothing goes as planned.

Hime-chan.

I’ll help bring your goals to nothing. I’ll help bring your determination to ruin. I’ll help bring all your hopes and dreams, your wishes, your prayers, crashing down around your ears. How does that sound?

“The future?”

“That’s what I said. It feels crappy when the future is vague, doesn’t it? Uncertain elements are a bummer…right? Everybody wants a bright future, don’t they?”

“Wh-What–”

“Either way, if you do get out of here, you’ve got nowhere to go, do you, Hime-chan? So why not come with me? My building’s pretty rundown, but there just so happens to be an empty room on the first floor right now. The rent is a stunningly affordable ten thousand yen a month. There’s no bath, but a public one is close by. I can’t say it’s a great building, but it’s a pretty fun place. The people who live there are cool. And it’s really the people who make a home a home. Take my word for it. The first person I should introduce you to is Miiko Asano, she’s a swordswoman. Miiko’s a little bit older than me, a real dignified lady, and she takes good care of me. I’m sure she’d adore you, Hime-chan.”

“Are…you–”

“On the top floor there’s an old Christian dude. I don’t know his real name, but he’s a funky old guy, he’s a rapper. He’s fun just to look at. But he’s dangerous, so don’t get too close… Then there’s a brother and sister, Moeta Ishinagi and Hoko Yamiguchi. Can’t forget those two. Moeta’s a tough customer, but his sister’s the innocent type. If she likes you, you’re golden.”

“What are you–”

“On the first floor, there’s a female college student who just moved in. She’d be your next-door neighbor, Hime-chan. She’s in her third year at Roshisha University, and her name’s Nanami Nanananami. She’s the worst, super uptight. I’d love it if your easygoing personality rubbed off on her a little.”

“What are you, talk–”

“And my room’s on the second floor, come up anytime. As far as school goes, it’s not like you’ve got anything else to do, so give it a shot. If you want to be a good kid, every day can’t actually be Sunday. You’d never find a real job with

that attitude, so let's see, I guess that'd make you a transfer student. You might have a hard time keeping up with the classes after going to this dumbass academy, but that's where I come in. I'll look out for you, I'll be your tutor. Then *that name* might actually start to mean something."

"–ing about–"

"And we'll all have tons of fun–all of us, together."

"What are you talking about!" Hime-chan finally exploded. "You're about to get zigzagged! So all this–all this stuff you're saying, everything you've been saying, I don't wanna hear it! There–there's no future! No future at all, not for Hime-chan!"

Being able to think about the future is proof that you still have leeway. If you really are living each day like it's your last, you don't have time to think about such things.

Each day, like it's your last–you're going to die anyway, no matter what you do, so.

"So you're going down with the ship? A double suicide with this stupid school? That's just childish selfishness. What am I supposed to do, caught up in some girl's rotten emotions?"

"Did you say–girl's, rotten?"

"Am I wrong? The way you do things is cowardly and rotten–but most of all, you're a cute girl. Which is way better than being a rotten guy like me, and yet you're throwing away your future… Is that why–the one person you didn't want to be hated by was Aikawa? Because she's a woman? Aikawa was the one person you didn't want to think of you as a 'murderer.' You didn't care about anyone besides her…and if this was going to be the end, I guess you wanted to

end it by her side? Sentimentalism, romanticism, or plain old heroism… whichever one it was, it's a far cry from my beloved stoicism. Honestly, I'm a little disappointed. By you."

"What do you–what do you know about it!" Now Hime-chan really was crying. This was no lie, those were real tears. And she didn't try to hide them as she yelled at me. Like she was accusing me, in a voice so loud I thought her throat was going to tear itself apart. "Don't talk like you understand how I feel! What do you know about the feelings of someone who's gotten used to killing!"

"If nothing else I know that you're a weepy little girl. In the end you're just scared, like everybody else. You're frightened because you don't know whether Aikawa will accept you or not. You're suspicious of the fact that Aikawa trusts you. Which is why you're testing her trust like this."

I understood her feelings as if they were my own.

I understood them as I understand my own.

I understood them as my own.

"'What'll I do if Jun Aikawa hates me'–and 'even if she doesn't hate me,' 'if I amount to so little that I'm not worth hating even though I've done all this'–"

"Hahaha…"

All emotion suddenly, rapidly departed from Hime-chan's face–positive and negative, life and death, all gone. She made a complete about-face, a turn to the dark side–becoming totally expressionless.

"Thank you so much, Master."

These obviously empty words of gratitude came lightly to her lips.

"I got to have a nice dream there before the end."

And, like the conductor of an orchestra.

“So that’s how it is…” I said. “Guess it is, at that.”

No good, huh?

Of course not, how could someone like me, someone who can’t even look after himself, look after someone else’s needs? Total failure. Was *this* the true non-action?

I’d shown her a nice dream–

But if the reality was shit, then it didn’t mean a thing.

A non-factoring non-action.

“Oh, right. I still don’t know your name.”

“…”

I waffled once more, right at the end. Despite the fact that, seconds before, I’d been trying to save this girl…now I was thinking about destroying her. I couldn’t decide: should I give this girl, who was teetering on the precipice, that final push over the edge? If I could destroy her, then I probably should.

It would probably feel good.

To obliterate this lovely young lady.

“Since it’s come to this, I can’t calls you Master anymore… I’ll do you the honor of calling you by your name. So please tell it to me.”

Tell you my name. Tell you my full name. You want me to snap every last one of your little zigzagging strings?

“Well…”

But I didn’t do that.

It didn't seem necessary anymore.

"*Guess I bought enough time for a costume change.*"

"What's that? Is that…your name?" asked Hime-chan, ingenuously.

Ahhh–so good-natured.

Everyone is just so good-natured.

Almost makes me feel like I'm the villain.

"Just talking to myself, Hime-chan… Don't worry about it. And *you said it yourself.*"

"Huh?" Hime-chan squinted one eye in confusion. "See, the thing is, Hime-chan was asking you your name–"

"*I said it too, and so did Shiogi–but you were the one who said it first, Hime-chan.* Jun Aikawa is soft on her friends."

"…?"

"*It's true that I left the Director's office of my own accord…*but *she's the one who brought me here to Hang 'Em High in the first place.* So don't you think it'd be kind of a lonely ending–*if she didn't come to my rescue*?"

"…!"

Hime-chan whirled around.

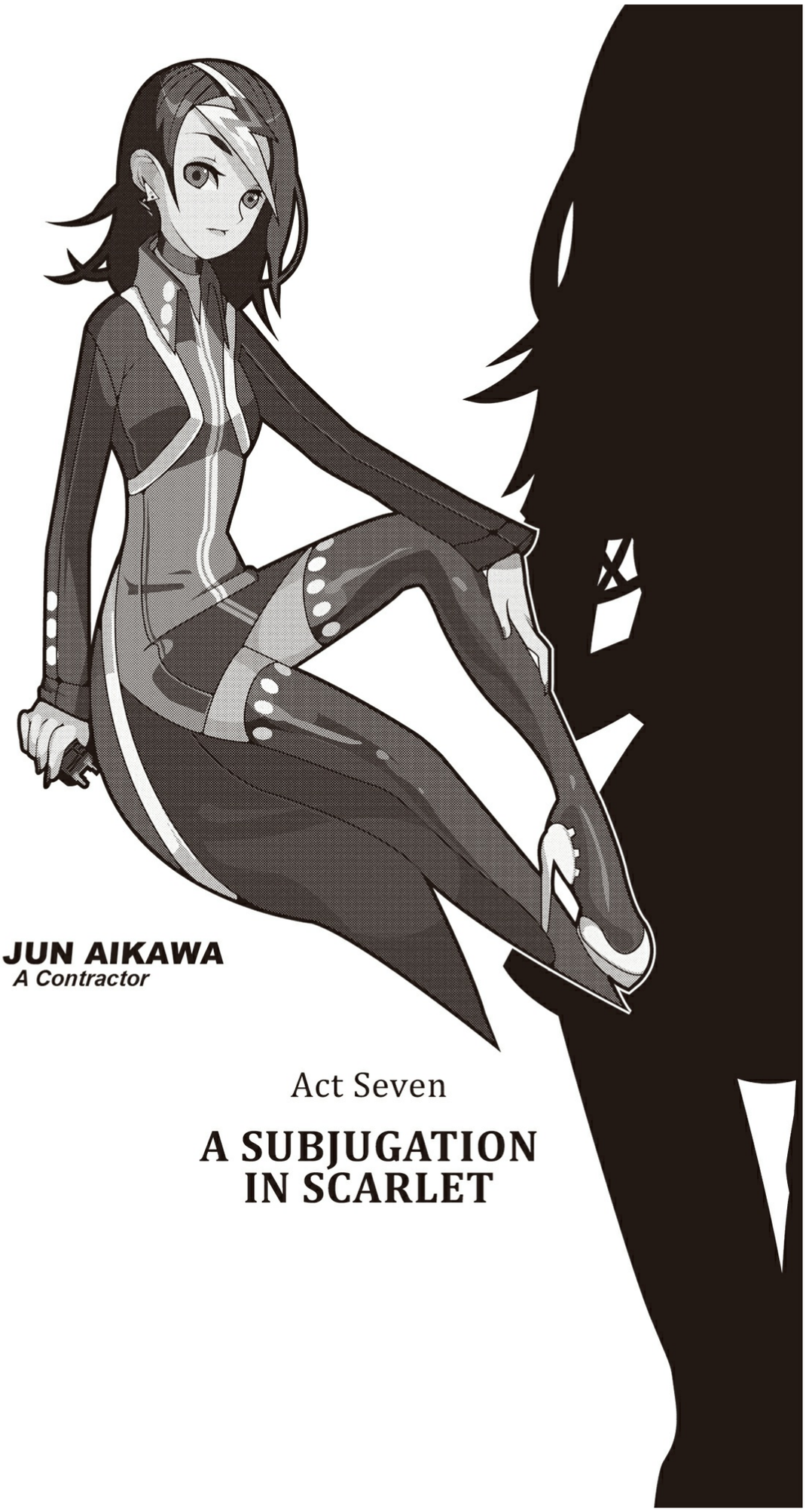
And there before her eyes–

Vermillion as the flames of a carmine conflagration.

Crimson as spilt blood, the scarlet of hell itself.

The contractor was simply there.

A cynical smirk playing across her face.



Act Seven

A SUBJUGATION IN SCARLET

0

The bullied one is the cause,

And the bully is effective.

1

What does the word “strength” really mean? If, like the standard for happiness and unhappiness, strength and weakness can only be evaluated relatively, then rejecting everything outside of oneself would be defined as strength, while accepting everything prior to oneself would be defined as weakness. Or maybe not, but in making any kind of judgment, one requires both a unit of measurement and a standard by which to measure.

Does it simply refer to bodily strength? Or an outsized presence? Does it mean physical solidity, or does it indicate mental obduracy? Simply because someone is always overbearing and cocky doesn’t mean they’re the strongest. Handling everything flawlessly, excelling at any and all skills, that alone isn’t enough to put you on top of the heap. Even mastering a single ability just makes you a genius, it doesn’t mean you can have whatever you want, or eradicate everything you don’t. Neither invincibility nor peerlessness alone constitutes a definition of “strongest.” And words like honor and glory are in fact its

antonyms. So how can you possibly determine that someone is the strongest? If you take this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, you'll end up at a more or less self-contradictory argument.

But if I were to present this train of reasoning to her, I'm sure she'd flash her usual nihilistic smile and say–

"I'm the strongest, and because I'm the strongest I don't need a reason."

"Thing is…"

Aikawa slowly spread her arms, showing off her bright-red outfit, and looked at me and Hime-chan. That cynical smile was still plastered on her face.

"I couldn't bear to wear anything but *this* for the climax. Black just wouldn't have worked for the big finish. Ugh, I hadda go all the way back to the Cobra, and it ate up a lot more time than I expected. Sorry I'm late, Iitan."

Hime-chan was shaking *uncontrollably.* Her whole body was heaving. As if she couldn't wrap her mind around it: *Why is Aikawa there,* or rather, *Why isn't Aikawa here, with me*?

"It doesn't makes a difference… Buying time with his silver tongue is the nonsense user's favorite trick, after all, isn't it, Ms. Aikawa?"

"I've told you not to call me by my last name… Only my 'enemies' do that. So–" Aikawa's smile didn't slip as she fixed her gaze on Hime-chan. "*Which're you gonna call me?*"

"Ah, uh–"

"What the hell do you think you're doing, anyway?"

"Ah…"

“I asked you what the hell you’re doing. Well?”

“Then–”

Still trembling.

“Then this is the end? Just like that?”

Shaking like a leaf.

“Why–”

Her quavering voice filled with all the emotion she could muster.

“–am I such a screw-up?” she shouted in a heartbreaking voice so small that it seemed like it might vanish altogether. “Where did I go wrong? Huh?” she asked, not of Aikawa, but of me. “I thought so hard about it… I considered it from every angle, and I was sure it’d go smoothly. Did Hime-chan–do something wrong?”

“…Hime-chan.”

“Seriously, am I really this much of a screw-up?”

“The hell’s that got to do with it?” Aikawa cut in. “Remember what I said about getting ‘caught in your own web’–you’ve been overthinking this to death, you and Iitan both. Not to mention that little lady lying on the ground there. Man, this hallway is drenched in blood. Dammit–don’t you assholes have anything better to do? Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re both under the impression that everything can be explained logically, aren’cha?” Aikawa scratched her head in frustration, like she was genuinely baffled. Then, heaving a sigh so long that it seemed to last for an eternity and for an instant, she started yelling, “Logic is nothing more than one plus one equals two. And theory just means zero plus zero equals zero. If you wanna see some neat, clean logic, go read a first-grade math textbook or something. Relying on that kind of

infantile shit, clinging to it, bowing down to it–are you really both such drooling idiots?!”

She wasn’t smiling anymore–she was pissed.

Insanely pissed. Violently furious.

“*I’m such a screw-up, this is the end*… Listen to you, shamelessly mewling like a whipped dog! Makes me red in the face just listening to you! You think I need to be any redder, you idiot?! Huh?? You think as long as *you* survive, that counts as a job well done? As long as no one finds out the truth, it’s a full success? You think you get to decide when it starts and ends? Bullshit! You moron, this idiotic farce could never have succeeded! You wanna hop on the bandwagon with all these traumatized little brats and their boo-hoo-hooing? I’ll give you something to cry about!”

“W-Wah…”

Weeping profusely, Hime-chan retreated a step, as if blown back by the force of Aikawa’s words. The unpleasant sensation of those “lines” being wrapped around my body was gone. No time to worry about holding me captive in the face of Jun Aikawa–and keeping a hostage would only be counterproductive against her anyway. Hime-chan probably knew this all too well. Which is exactly why she’d wanted to keep Aikawa on her side.

Or–maybe that wasn’t why?

That was part of it, but Hime-chan was simply…

“This ain’t funny–I’m not the slightest bit amused! If you’re going to make an enemy of me, at least give me a little chuckle! Everyone averts their eyes from what they should really be doing, squandering every little thing they’ve got, making excuses, lying, sidestepping–creeping around like servile little worms!

Shape up! It couldn't be simpler, just don't slack off! Why can't you guys get it together?! Straighten out already!"

That's just it…

That's the one thing we can't do.

Both Hime-chan, and me.

But now Aikawa had gotten up a head of steam, and she couldn't keep her anger in check.

"Puff out your chest, stand up straight, take pride in yourself, roar at your enemies, don't hang your head! Never back down, never give up, and don't think you can just end it whenever you want! You feeling all sympathetic, you little shits?! Don't cozy up to each other, don't get attached, it's gross, what're you, animals?! Don't involve someone else in your own narcissism, you wanna worry, go ahead and worry, but don't come crying to me, you think I can help you with your weird issues?! Look at you, licking each other's wounds. There's no place for compromise here! Don't dismiss it out of hand, and don't find some abstruse reason to accept it! Forget about everything else and just worry about your own decisions!"

"Shut up!" shouted Hime-chan, clutching her stomach–and glaring back at Aikawa.

The tears were gone. Nowhere to be found. Her eyes were no longer those of a teenage girl–they were zigzag eyes, slashed to pieces somewhere inside, rotten to the core.

It had all been an act.

Her purity, her naïveté. Her good works and her goodwill.

If it had all been an act–then still, even after being saved.

“It’s over, this is the end! The truth’s been revealed… All the killing–the broken promises, the betrayals–”

Betrayal, betrayal, betrayal.

Tricking your friends first, in order to trick your enemies.

Repeated over and over and over.

Hime-chan was so pitiful. Too painful to look at. Too painful to abandon.

“That’s…enough, Hime-chan–”

“Shut up, be quiet, shut your mouth! Stop calling me that! Why don’t *you* learn some manners!” yelled Hime-chan, glaring at me this time, her eyes bugging out of her head. It was an expression without a shred of purity or loveliness. And yet, no expression could’ve aroused more pity in me. “Don’t be kind to me! Don’t get up on your high horse and think you can do me a favor by being my friend! It’s–it’s disgusting!”

“…Hime-chan.”

“What the hell is that face? Do you feel bad for me? Compassionate, even? And you were so repulsed by murder…how kind of you. But–it’s not just the Director, and Saijo and Hagihara. You know that, right?”

She scrutinized me with something like pity in turn, her eyes filled with a deep-seated malice that didn’t suit her at all.

“Have you still not figured out–why none of the ‘faculty’ or ‘security’ ever showed up?”

How could they, when *that* was all taken care of before I ever even set foot on the school grounds–

I tried to envision it.

The faculty building. The staff room.

Just beneath the floor of the Director's office–sealed up tight.

A bloodbath unfolding within–

"Murder" didn't cover it anymore.

"Serial killer" didn't quite work either.

That enclosed space.

Obstructed on all four sides by walls, with no way to see inside. To see living people–or dead people. No way to see inside, not until the walls crumbled.

And–

By that time, it'd already be too late.

"Either way, this academy is finished."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," Aikawa said. "But you don't get to decide when it's over." She pointed at Hime-chan. "I won't let you."

"I keep telling you! Enough already, Ms. Aikawa! Enough, it's all over!"

Calling Aikawa by her last name–Hime-chan flicked up both arms.

Whum whum whum–that sound, like a child whimpering, like the air being rent into a vacuum, reverberated down the hall, all of it aimed at Jun Aikawa. Because of their thinness and speed, it was impossible to visually track *them.* Yes, it was an undeniable fact: the moment we'd set foot in this hallway, we were caught in Hime-chan's spider web. Visibility was poor, and even the world's strongest had no hope of avoiding every one of the myriad "lines" closing in on her from all directions by way of every bump and hollow of this locked-room hallway.

But the contractor–

Didn't even try to avoid them at all.

The invisible wires coiled all around Aikawa's body. Hime-chan herself was so taken aback that she stopped moving, and as she stood there staring in surprise, Aikawa snarled, "What's the problem? Oh, sorry, did you want me to try and dodge these? Not losing your nerve this late in the game, are ya? Or, hahaha, were you hoping I'd end your life for you?"

"…nh. Guh."

"Bull's-eye, huh? Well, sorry to disappoint, but I'm eeeeever so fond of you. I will ostentatiously, thoroughly, and without reservation spare no effort in sparing you. Don't expect me to be your easy way out. I'm not going to kill you, I'm going to give you all the tepid love I can muster, so we'll never be apart again. Ha, though I'm pretty sure death might be the only way to cure you of your stupidity."

"Don't you, make fun, of me…" Chewing her lower lip, Hime-chan *shivered* uncontrollably. Not in fear, not anymore. This was rage–rage at Aikawa. Or was it–the battle frenzy of the zigzag berserker?

"You've really improved, though, allow me to compliment you on that. Casting your webs so precisely without weighting the ends of the lines… You could find a lifetime gig with an acrobatic troupe if you wanted. Who are you, Takuya Yamashiro? Way to perfect such a pain-in-the-ass skill. Could it be? Do you still feel beholden to *her*?" Aikawa sneered at Hime-chan, clearly mocking her.

At being openly insulted like this despite holding the overwhelmingly superior position–and the home-field advantage, Hime-chan's face twisted and she

screamed with all her might, “Do you not even realize this is checkmate, Ms. Aikawa?!”

“Look at this jumped-up pawn, prattling on and on. Sorry to say I was born a queen–what do I care if lesser pieces like the king get taken?”

Hime-chan seemed determined–but then, for an instant, she hesitated. An instant is only an instant, though, and she whipped both determined arms into the air at the same time. “This is the end of the line! Your objective–”

And for the final time–

“First, despair. I hit my cutoff with you a long time ago, you little shit.”

And–and I must’ve been seeing things, but Aikawa smiled with a certain tenderness.

“Also, relax. Because the bonds between us can never be cut.”

2

Before she could snap her arms down for the final time, Hime-chan herself collapsed to the floor of the hallway. Or perhaps I should say, she pitched forward, as if her body was being dragged down by her own arms. She lay facedown in a very unflattering position, with a look on her face that made it clear she had no idea what had happened.

“Huh? What the…”

“Anything the matter? Lose your balance? Hm?”

Aikawa–had not, of course, been sliced to pieces. She just stood there grinning, acting like she had nothing whatsoever to worry about. Hime-chan immediately tried to get up, but in this too she failed, ending up flat on her face like a passed-out drunk.

When I looked at Aikawa–there was no indication that she’d done anything at all. Of course not, at this distance how could she? In the absence of any missile weapons, and without recourse to superpowers, to send Hime-chan sprawling like that…

Or wait.

Was her position–slightly different than it had been before?

“Seems like you use a lot of different ‘lines’ to create variation in weight, speed, and thickness. Still, the principle of the weaver’s attack is always the same. Using ‘speed’ and ‘thinness’ to cut. Kind of like slicing bread, I suppose. In which case there are, broadly speaking, two ways of avoiding it–‘moving

slowly.' And 'moving quickly.'"

Aikawa's words were clearly contradictory. Hime-chan ignored them in her frantic attempts to get back up, but every time she tried, she went sprawling ungainly on the floor once more, as if something was dragging her back down. Almost as if–almost as if *she was a puppet, dancing on an unseen string*…

"Ah."

"Light bulb finally going off, Iitan? Yup, you got it. As long as I'm outside that 'web barrier' she's got strung up–regardless of what surfaces she's using as mediating pulleys, the lines wound around me right now are all connected to her gloves. So it's a piece of cake, right? As long as I move faster than Himecchi does, I'm fine. As long as I'm faster, and stronger."

The moment I figured it out–Aikawa's position shifted again. And at the same time, Hime-chan collapsed again to the ground as if dragged down by her own arms. I guess in principle it was like holding a dog's leash. But all Hime-chan had to do was move her fingers. In that sense, her small stature and short reach were well-suited to being a weaver. She could lift and lower her finger much more quickly than the average person, which gave her a serious advantage. By contrast, Aikawa had to move her entire body, since the lines were wrapped all around her. Very much easier said than done.

"The drawback to this as a killing technique is the time lag between impetus and impact. And that lag is decisive when you're dealing with me. However fast your lines may be–against me, they're light-years too slow. And even if we move at the same speed, victory goes to the stronger–it's just a tug of war, Ichihime. Weakness is tragic, isn't it. Turns out strength is important after all. I don't know how dangerous these threads you've got wrapped around me are, but as long as I can move faster than them, they're nothing but accessories. Ha,

nothing more than a street performer's trick. If you can only target people who are standing still, you'll never be a killer like *her.*"

"Sh-Shut up–shut up shut up–" Hime-chan glared at Aikawa from where she lay immobile on the hallway floor. "H-How can this–"

It was a good question, how can this be? Who would ever expect their target to move faster than the flick of a finger? It felt like it wasn't Aikawa who was fast but us who were slow, like Aikawa herself wasn't moving and the observers, me and Hime-chan, were revolving around her in tandem. There was no wind-up and no follow-through, very much indeed like a superpower, like she was teleporting.

There was no time lag whatsoever between when Aikawa decided to move and when she'd already begun moving. Starting and stopping simultaneously–it wasn't that she acted quickly, she acted so quickly that one action became the next.

"Aww. I guess this is how it goes when your opponent is just some little brat," Aikawa sneered maliciously, looking down her nose at Hime-chan where she lay like a baby crawling across the floor. "A duel to the death with you turns out to be pretty boring after all. I'm done."

"Done? Please, give me a break–in *that* case, there's still a way!" groaned Hime-chan. "Even if you can neutralize my direct attacks, Ms. Aikawa, as long as you can't cross this barrier–"

"You're not listening. I told you, the bonds between us can never be cut, we're *connected.*"

Aikawa opened her fist, revealing the stun gun clutched inside it. Hime-chan's eyes went wide, but it was too late. There was no way she could reel in her lines

from where she lay crumpled on the floor, and Aikawa had most likely tangled them up anyway. Finally realizing this, Hime-chan tried to get the gloves off her hands, but–

She was, indeed, too slow.

Against Jun Aikawa, she was light-years too slow.

The contractor unhesitatingly jabbed the tip of the stun gun into her own arm and pressed the switch.

It was all over in a flash–would not be a wholly accurate statement.

It was over before that moment arrived, long before, the instant Hime-chan decided to take on Aikawa.

Hime-chan tensed up like someone had pushed the pause button. Then, she started twitching like a shrimp and flipped violently over to lie face up with her back arched, freezing once more in that position–and at length, as black smoke started to rise from her smoldering form, she slumped to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut. She seemed to have completely lost consciousness, but her body continued twitching and spasming.

“Dear oh dear…and after I took the trouble to change and everything.”

Aikawa looked down with regret at her clothing, scorched like Hime-chan herself, and tugged idly at the frayed ends. Parts of her shoulders and belly were exposed, which was quite a sight, but it wouldn’t do to stare so I turned to peer at Hime-chan once more. She was still twitching. The spasms in her fingers, which had borne the brunt of the direct electrical discharge, were particularly severe. They continued to vibrate minutely, as if each was a distinct creature with a will of its own.

“Gwa. Right, I guess aramid fiber is an insulator. There’re still a few lines left.

Is this Kevlar? Shit, am I gonna have to unravel these myself? What a goddamn pain in the ass."

Grumbling away, Aikawa began to extricate herself from the remaining lines that hadn't been fried by the electric shock. Without their master to control them, they were apparently not easy to reckon with, and she seemed to be struggling. Enjoying the sight of Aikawa in this fix, I said, "So this is what the stun gun was for, huh?" Asking this sort of question also fell within the purview of my job.

"Yeah. I toldja, didn't I? That 'the need arose to get a certain person out of here in one piece.'"

"I was sure it'd been for me."

"Hunh? Why? I'd never do something so horrible to my beloved Iitan," Aikawa dissembled. "Well, worrying about foolish brats is all part of the job. If I was going to take on her Zigzag directly, I couldn't do it without injuring her."

So being armed actually made Aikawa weaker?

Maybe an explanation is unnecessary, but here we go: Aikawa had applied her pocket-sized stun gun, which put out enough voltage to knock out a person's memory of the past two or three days (and that was with the limiter on), to Hime-chan's "lines." This time Aikawa had the limiter off; she unleashed the maximum voltage, piling on more than the usual current. It was basically like touching a power line. This was no ordinary hit from a stun gun…it was a massive burst of power, more like an explosive. Sparks went flying all around the hallway. It was such a mindboggling discharge that I'd gotten a taste of it just from standing nearby.

No matter how robust the various strings might've been, it was difficult to

stand up to such high voltage and high heat at the same time, and the majority of them had been fried instantly–but that instant while they were still intact was more than enough. Their master had taken maximum damage. Excepting the insulators among them, all of the “lines” had become Aikawa’s weapons.

If her opponent’s trump card was speed, Aikawa would overpower her with that very speed. If they used strings against her, she would exploit those very strings. Hime-chan thought she’d caught Aikawa in her web–but it was the other way around.

No matter how large a web the spider weaves.

The eagle can penetrate it effortlessly.

“…”

Connected to the same lines, Aikawa was of course subject to the same conditions. And not only that (I don’t know what she was thinking), she’d applied the stun gun directly to her own arm, so she must’ve taken the same high–no, *an even higher* voltage than Hime-chan. You could say it was like settling things with a suicide bomb, except that Aikawa seemed totally fine. She had lost neither consciousness nor her memory, and was unharmed save for her clothing–it was lined with custom insulation, hence the costume change… That kind of explanation would certainly add up, but I didn’t see the need for such trivial arithmetic in the face of this contractor. Jun Aikawa could probably crash a plane into the crater of a volcano and walk away without a scratch. Theorizing about someone who transcends theory is a losing proposition. Even if it seems illogical, zero factorial still equals one.

“Whoa, these threads are all tangled! Ow, they’re biting into my skin! What are you standing around for, help me! Are you the Devil or something?!”

“…”

I approached Aikawa without a word and carefully undid the lines one by one. My fingertips got a little cut up, but somehow I managed to undo enough of them that Aikawa could move freely.

“Woweee. Thanks, Iichan. Wawawa. I love you Iichan!”

“Please don’t do that.”

I really hated it.

“C’mon, I’m just trying to get equal stage-time for the other characters…”

“Then how about doing an impression of Akari?”

“I can’t just do anyone on command…”

“Getting angry like that–I didn’t know you had it in you.” I looked down at Hime-chan where she lay fallen. “So you get plain old angry sometimes, all recrimination and forgiveness aside?”

“I hate you! I never want to see your face again so hurry up and die, you pig-fucking bastard!”

“…?”

“Akari Chiga.”

“Enough already.”

Though it did make me a tiny bit happy.

“Hah. I’m insanely big-hearted, but I’ve got a seriously short fuse. Unlike you. In fact, I can transform into a Super Saiyan once a week.”

“Uh huh…”

Might actually be true.

“Against a jackass like Zerozaki who’s always ready to throw down, I can really let myself go and have some fun. Overthinkers like you guys, though, always hemming and hawing, you annoy the crap out of me.”

“This is like some prime-time soap about a high school. Not that this place is anything like a high school…”

“‘I just wanted you to pay attention to me, teacher,’ that kind of thing? When was the last time you watched TV, Iitan? But listen, it doesn’t really have anything to do with that, ya know,” Aikawa said with a grin. “Not like my lecture was ever going to get through to her. You’d already taken care of the lecturing. Since no matter what I said, I was coming from a position of safety. If you tell a starving person that ‘man cannot survive on bread alone,’ they’re going to tell you to go to hell, right? But you’d already done the convincing, she could relate to you. Thankfully I just had to take care of the cleanup.”

Is that how it was?

I didn’t think so, but if that were true…then maybe I’d been able to save Hime-chan, just a tiny bit. I, who could do no saving, had saved Hime-chan, who was beyond salvation. That right there was nothing more than a record-breakingly broken contradiction.

“Then again, hahaha, no matter how cool you manage to sound, the skirt kind of ruins the effect.”

“Did you have to say that? I’d almost forgotten about it, dammit. Still, I guess it’s finally over.”

“I keep telling everybody,” Aikawa smacked me upside the head. “You can’t just decide it’s over. For cryin’ out loud. Don’t you get it? Life’s never over, not even when we die.”

“Not even when we die?” That was a novel opinion.

“Yeah. Even after you’re dead, your influence lingers on. The truth is, nothing’s ever over. Same’s true for her… Maybe you’ll understand when you’re a little more grown up? But even if you don’t, at least act like you do. That alone’ll make a huge difference.”

“That’s not something I want to understand, though,” I said, then looked down at Hime-chan. “What’ll become of her? If this school’s done for… But with something this big, escaping, dropping out, those questions aren’t relevant anymore, are they? She killed the Director, after all.”

“No idea. My job is to get Ichihime out of here, anything after that is outside the terms of my contract–or at least I’d like to think so. But I guess that’s not gonna fly? The girl’s no stranger to me, so yeah, I’ll deal with it.”

“I see.”

She really is soft on her friends.

But that, that above all, is what makes her the strongest.

“First things first, we’ll hand her over to the police.”

“That’s terrible!”

“Wawaa! Ikkun’s pissed! I only said what anybody would say! That’s like playing strip poker, but in the middle of a contest to see who can stand being in the sun the longest!”

“Enough with the impressions already.”

It was too late, no one could stop Jun Aikawa now.

“Kahaha. Well, this is one hell of a riot.” With this impression of Mr. No Longer Human, Aikawa sat down beside Hime-chan, who’d finally stopped

twitching. Lovingly, and with a certain air of resignation, the world's strongest stroked Hime-chan's face and remarked with a little nod, "When she's asleep, she just looks like a sweet kid… Dammit, the little shit."

Her gesture was like that of an older sister dealing with a sibling who was a real handful, and it somehow struck me as charming. Aikawa was absolutely not a tender person, truly not at all a pleasant person. But she still couldn't just abandon a girl like Hime-chan.

"…Hm."

"What's wrong?"

"This is no good. Her heart's stopped."

"You mean she's never going to wake up?!"

Everyone, be careful with stun guns.

I'm serious.

"Oh well. If she dies, no big deal."

"It's a huge deal!"

"The perp is one of us!"

"And it wouldn't be me! Why the hell did you have to take the limiter off the stun gun?! The regular voltage probably would've been plenty to knock her out!"

"But it wouldn't have fried the lines."

So she did it because she couldn't be bothered to untangle them by hand?!

"It's fine, I'll resuscitate her right now… Chill out, Iitan, your dryness is your best quality. Try to keep what little personality you have."

Aikawa leaned over to begin CPR, then seemed to change her mind and looked up at me again.

“You wanna take a shot at it, Iitan? This is your big chance to get in there without being called a pedophile.”

“Don’t play around with people’s lives! Please, this is serious!”

“What’s your problem, does it gross you out? Yeah, artificial respiration definitely does have kind of a necrophilia vibe.”

“Exactly, I know it’s me we’re talking about here, but dead bodies are one thing that even I’m not into–wait, scratch that!” For the first time in his life, the nonsense user was so flustered that he played the straight man to his own joke. “Quit fooling around! Do you have some disease where you can’t be serious for more than five seconds?!”

“Man, you’ve got no sense of humor… What a stick in the mud. You stupid idiot. I can’t stand you, Ikkun.”

And at long last, Aikawa began life-saving procedures. While she was doing the chest compressions, I could hear Hime-chan’s ribs snapping one after another, but let’s file that under unavoidable. Aikawa continued for five minutes, ten minutes, then stood up and said, “’Kay, all finished. She’s back.”

“Taking this pretty lightly, aren’t you…”

Life and death, killing, being killed, did the world’s strongest even get a do-over on these kinds of things? I sailed past astounded and ended up feeling empty.

This–was really no big deal to her. Performances and lies, falsehood and deception, no matter what else happened, such things were irrelevant to Jun Aikawa. And even if they were relevant–they were meaningless.

Aikawa hoisted Hime-chan onto her back and stood up.

“Do you want me to take her? You must be tired, Jun.”

“Nah.” Aikawa shook her head. “It’s my job.”

And Aikawa set off down the hall with Hime-chan on her back. Walking along beside her, I asked by way of confirmation, “But we can relax for the moment, right? We’ve come to a stopping point? The Academy doesn’t have a director anymore, or a tactics expert–so all that’s left now is for us to leave, right?”

“……”

“Why’s your answer four ellipses in a row?”

Was she doing an impression of Teruko now?

Even I can do that one.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Aikawa said, not meeting my eyes. “Ichihime did a good job of manipulating info vis-à-vis the other students here, and she did a good job of hiding, but it seems she didn’t do much of anything when it comes to the ‘outside world.’ Apparently there are people who know that something abnormal is going on inside the school.”

“People like who?”

“The various alumnae of Hang ’Em High who now work at Rule. Oh, and the elite of the Origami family. Aaand everyone from all the other branches of Sumiyuri Academy.”

“That’s an ominous list.”

“See, they were all waiting outside the gates.”

“…”

Is that why…it took her so long to get back from changing her clothes?

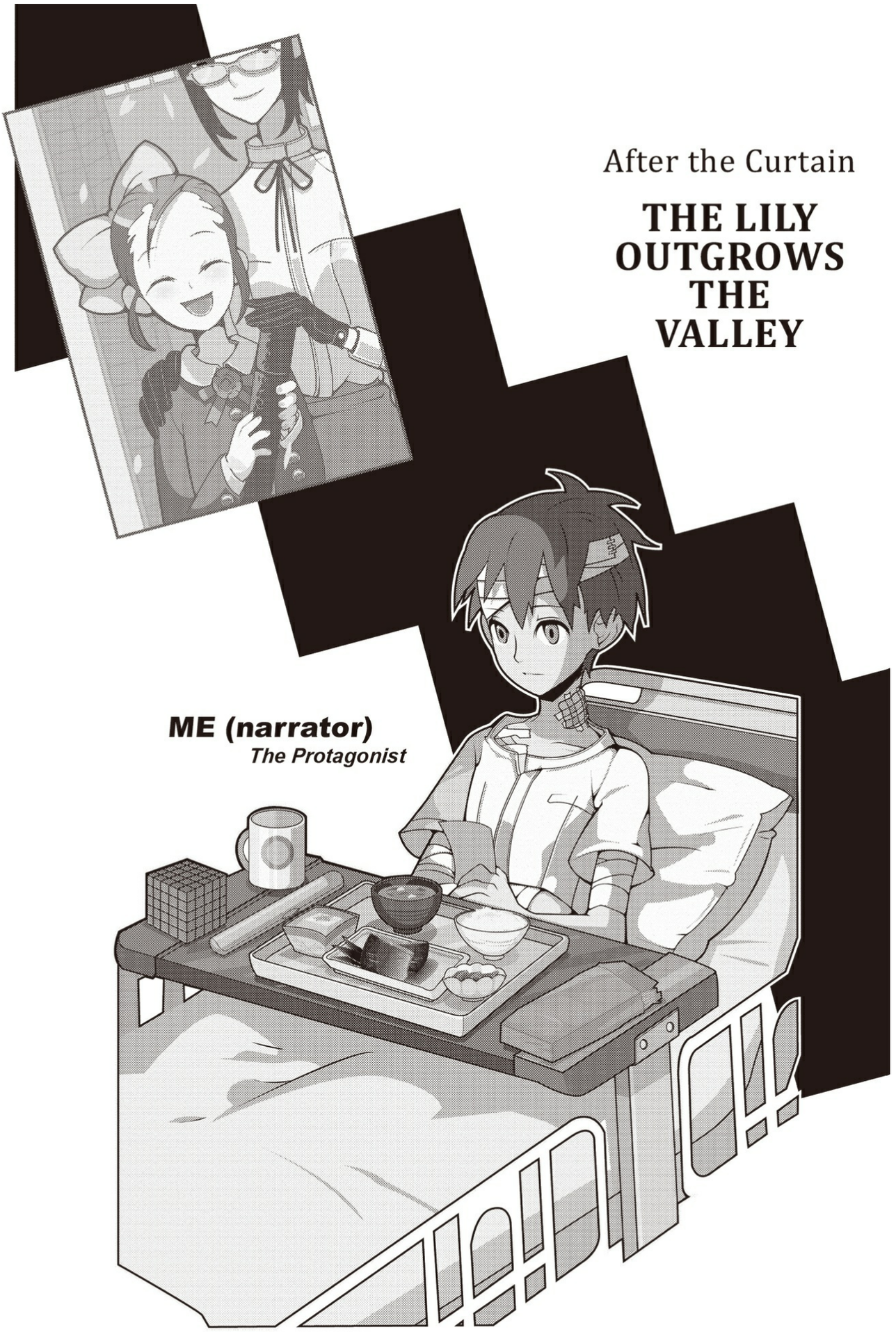
In other words, things have gone from bad to worse…

“Okaaay. This’ll just be the mop-up. Before they all come storming in here, let’s march straight out there like we own the place. Drumroll please.”

Aikawa sounded excited as she strode away down the hallway, so dimly lit that we could see nothing of what lay ahead of us. She walked calmly, ready for anything, for all the world as if she felt no uneasiness at all.

“Those people make me laugh.”

What else could I do? I just followed along behind her, the world’s strongest, like a sigh with a little nonsense mixed in.


After the Curtain
THE LILY OUTGROWS THE VALLEY
ME (narrator)
The Protagonist

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether it's crazier to treat people as objects or objects as people, it's abundantly clear which one is more of a nuisance–so I'll omit everything that happened after that. And, some time later.

I was in a certain hospital in the Kyoto suburbs. *Completely healed in a week*–that was the prognosis I'd been given. How this outcome came about, I'm actually not going to tell you. The one thing I will say is that if the weakest wants to roll with the strongest, it doesn't come for free; there's a price that must be paid. But if that price is nothing more than a few broken bones, I'd call that a good deal. I'm supposed to go on a trip with Kunagisa at the beginning of next month, so as long as I'm out of the hospital by then, I'll be happy.

Life in the hospital really isn't so boring. I'd only just started reading that book Miiko lent me when Aikawa first showed up, and as long as there's room to stretch out my legs and get some sleep, one place is pretty much as good as another as far as I'm concerned. As long as it's not, well, an abnormal place.

Aikawa came to visit me the day before I was to be discharged from the hospital. This time she didn't knock. It seemed her personal knocking craze had come to an end. She was wearing the same bright-red suit as always, but whether she'd had a new one made or just had a closet full of duplicates, I couldn't tell you.

"Yooo, sorry for the radio silence to keep you waiting! You have but to speak my name and I shall roll over Beethoven! Damn, a private room, huh? Mister moneybags over here."

“I can’t bear to sleep in the same room as some stranger, that’s all. Just the thought of someone I don’t know watching me sleep gives me the willies. It isn’t cheap, but what can you do.”

“Hmmm. Well then, I’ve got great news for you,” said Aikawa, casually tossing an envelope onto the bed. A fat one. I didn’t need to ask to know what was inside.

“Here’s your piece of the action for helping me out this time around.”

“Thanks anyway, Jun, but I don’t need your money. With Hime-chan the way she is you probably didn’t make much on this job, so this one’s on the house.”

“Aren’t you the stoic one. But this kind of thing has to be done properly. They say a man who has no money might as well have no head, ya know?”

“So? Who cares about a head, it’ll just end up decapitated or strangulated or suspended from the ceiling anyway. I’m pretty sure that expression just means that money’s not all that important.”

“Hanh. Look at you, the humble shepherd.”

Chuckling sardonically, Aikawa sat down in the folding chair set out for well-wishers. I didn’t believe for a second that she was there to wish me well, but I couldn’t tell her not to sit.

“Still, pressing you into service without giving you something in return would go against my moral code. Let’s see. Okay, I’ve got it, I’ll do an impression of Hikari in a compromising position.”

“Please don’t.”

“Ah, no, stop it! Not that! Please, no more! You can’t! Stop, I said!”

“You’re the one who needs to stop!”

“You’re actually pissed!” Even Aikawa was surprised at this, and she put up her hands in surrender. “Wow, that’s a shocker. My bad, I didn’t realize she was so sacred to you…I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I was wrong.”

This apology was delivered in Maki’s voice.

Really got my fucking number, don’t you.

“Why are you really here?”

“No reason. Hadn’t you been hoping I’d come? After all, you’re still just as ignorant as you were at the beginning. So I came to entertain your questions.”

“A-ha… Well, it’s my policy not to get too deep into things that seem like they might be bad news. But I’ll ask anyway.” Still unsure of Aikawa’s true intentions, I began with: “What happened to Hime-chan afterwards?”

“Starting with the hardest question first, are ya, pal? Awright. Here’s what happened to Himecchi.” Without asking, Aikawa took an apple from my basket of get-well goodies and chomped into it. “That stun gun did its work. She lost her memory, and now she’s in a secret hospital.”

“Ah…”

“Her body’s in rough shape, too. It was already starting to wear out thanks to all the training she’d been through in that place, and to sustain that much damage on top of it? Burns all over her body. The fingers directly connected to those lines–particularly nasty. It was mitigated somewhat by her gloves, which had seven layers of insulation, but even if she can hold a pencil, she can’t hold chopsticks. You know about that stuff? Ohm’s law, Joule’s laws, and so forth.”

“So there’ll be some serious lasting effects, huh–” Despite the fact that Aikawa had brought that stun gun for the purpose of taking Hime-chan unharmed. Still, she got off a lot better than if she’d taken on the contractor

directly.

“Which is *exactly* what makes it so tough,” Aikawa said. “Losing her memory means she’s probably forgotten about killing Noa Origami and the rest of the staff, not to mention Shiogi Hagihara and Tamamo Saijo… And it may even mean that she’s forgotten all about Hang ’Em High itself. And as long as her injured fingers haven’t healed, she won’t be able to use Zigzag. You know what that means, right?”

The thought flashed through my mind that that must’ve been why she took the limiter off the stun gun: to temporarily seal away Zigzag itself, along with the abhorrent memories of it. That may’ve been nothing more than my own narrativistic sentiment, though.

“It’s gonna be hard,” Aikawa went on. “It doesn’t make the things she’s done go away. The people connected to the ones she killed aren’t gonna stand for that. The Origami family, Rule, they’re falling all over themselves to find the person behind it all.”

Just because the culprit forgets the crime doesn’t make it go away, and it doesn’t mean she can get away without being punished. Whatever the whys and wherefores, she has to take responsibility for her actions. Of course.

“Plus, if I were to ‘pretend this never happened’ and let Ichihime off the hook, I have a feeling you’d lose respect for me.”

“That’s not something I ever expected to hear you say. Do you even care about how other people see you, Jun?”

“Qua? If you were just another person, I wouldn’t care at all.”

She grinned an unpleasant grin. I don’t really know why, but I felt like she was making fun of me, so I just shrugged my shoulders and asked a different

question.

“How did things all fall out in the end?”

“Hang ’Em High is now effectively shuttered. Just as Ichihime hoped. The students…I wonder what’ll become of them. That still seems to be up in the air. And it hasn’t come out yet that the three of us were the perpetrators.”

I’m an accomplice now?

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve got a few irons in the fire… The Origami family owes me, so no worries on that front. That still leaves the problem of Rule. Nothing you have to worry about, they’ll leave you alone. Ichihime, though… I wanna keep them off her scent, but I also wonder if I should.”

“So even you have moments of doubt, Jun.”

“Sure. Not like I want ’em, of course. Her memory might return, and her finger might heal up again. I also figure it’s not a good idea to stick my nose in too far. It’d be one thing if she’d actually asked me to conceal the murders.”

She hadn’t–probably because she couldn’t fully trust Aikawa. Which was neither Aikawa’s fault nor Hime-chan’s, it was just one of those things. Like me, I imagine Hime-chan just fundamentally couldn’t trust other people. But she still looked to them for help–and as in this situation, she cooked up a half-baked plan and ended up caught in her own web. Though maybe that’s less fear or trepidation–than vanity and yearning.

“But why did Hime-chan want to kill the Director…no, want to shut down the academy in the first place? What was her initial plan?”

“First, there’s something I wanna apologize for.” Aikawa moved her chair closer to me and leaned in close. “In the beginning I told you something like, ‘Ask Ichihime for the details…she’ll be able to give you a proper explanation.’

That was a lie, sorry.”

“It sure was.”

You only had to talk to her for a minute to know that. Hime-chan was totally incapable of giving a decent explanation of anything. Whatever lies and false fronts she may’ve used to mask her true self, that at least I could say with certainty.

“Her Japanese wasn’t very good, to begin with. No way she was going to give a proper explanation.”

“I figured you’d do a better job if you didn’t know the particulars. I never expected Ichihime herself to actively deceive you… Did she tell you why she’s so bad with words?”

“Let’s see. She said she was raised in America.”

“Yeah? That’s not why, though.” Aikawa tapped my temple with her finger. “Her frontal lobe. An *a posteriori* injury to her language center.”

“…”

“You know what the frontal lobe does? It’s the part of the brain that controls personality, the ego, and our ability to communicate with others. That part of Ichihime’s brain *was damaged.* Which is why she has problems with language. She doesn’t even recognize it when it’s happening.”

“Recognition…”

Language recognition.

Or no, was it her word recognition circuit?

“Because of that, conversations with her always go off the rails somewhere. It’s kind of like a Japanese person and a Chinese person conversing in Korean,

somehow it never quite comes together.”

Kind of a zigzag feeling, chuckled Aikawa.

“Which is why–I’m pretty sure we’ll never find out Ichihime’s true motivation, even if we ask her. Since any kind of mutual understanding is difficult in the first place. What she was thinking when she abandoned herself to those acts will remain an eternal mystery.”

“That’s true of everyone, though, isn’t it?”

No two people can ever fully comprehend each other. It’s simply a question of whether or not you can convince yourself that you can, whether or not you can delude yourself into believing that it’s possible.

Sure is, nodded Aikawa. “So I’ll have to stick to spouting vague approximations based on my best guesses. I suspect she had it all worked out from the start. She inserted me into her machinations by getting me involved, getting me on her side, and pulling the wool over my eyes. She took care of the Director and the rest of the staff first, before sounding the alarm over her own escape… Oh, and FYI, they discovered a ton of dismembered corpses in the staff room. About thirty-seven people’s worth.”

“–”

I already knew she’d killed them, but to hear the actual number said out loud was enough to take my breath away. Thirty-seven people–plus Shiogi and Tamamo and Noa Origami makes forty. Mr. No Longer Human didn’t even kill a third that many last month.

To be perfectly honest, once the number of murder victims exceeds about a dozen, I cease to be able to render a normal value judgment. Quite the reverse, in fact: a certain admiration for Hime-chan even started to well up in me, for

pulling that off inside a closed-off space like their school. Which I know is totally inappropriate.

One person in the locked room of the Director's office, thirty-eight altogether in the locked room of the faculty building–and forty altogether in the locked room of Hang 'Em High.

A closed-off space. Impossible to tell from the outside what's happening on the inside. Because it was a warzone–because it was a closed-off warzone.

It was probably a piece of cake.

Locked rooms are locked rooms precisely because they're closed off, but who knew it could be so different–depending on whether they're closed off to keep things in, or to keep things out.

It's why this happened, why she did those things.

Can you approve of that behavior?

Well, can you? Mr. Defective Product?

"Her Zigzag was originally intended for crowd-control. It's not a killing technique, it's for restraining people. Something like a thread is ultimately more effective than rope for tying someone up. So she restrained them, then chopped them up with a chainsaw. Lessee, what else. She used the walkie-talkie to contact Hagihara on the Director's dedicated frequency and informed her that 'Ichihime Yukariki has escaped.' Her plan was discovered around the time you infiltrated the school, not because she blew it. She revealed it to them herself."

"She expected it to be you."

"But I sent you in ahead of me. Which Ichihime dealt with as well as she could've…but it did make things a little more precarious for her. She couldn't

use Zigzag in front of you, so when they took you two by surprise, she was captured."

Is…that why Hime-chan had been so insistent about staying in that classroom? But I was already taking action even as she tried to veto it. I was definitely an unexpected element for her.

"And I went to have a chat with the Director, just as she guessed I would… That part would've gone the same whether you were there or not. With her flight already revealed, I was even surer to head to Noa's spot than I would've been if it hadn't come out yet. Haha, the little fucker really read my mind."

"So Hime-chan had a certain facility with vocal mimicry and mindreading herself."

"Sure. Though it's not like she was my disciple or anything. So we were together–and this is crucial–we were together when we discovered the Director's body. Then she could *play the role of the victim, framed for the crime.*"

"But that's a dangerous game…"

"That danger worked in Ichihime's favor too, I guess. Same as hiding under the desk. The more of that she did, the less I would suspect her. I did think the way Noa was killed resembled Zigzag…but maybe it was a fake, a copycat? It gave me all kinds of things to waste my time pondering."

"So you knew about 'Zigzag.'"

"Yup. I didn't tell you about it since Ichihime seemed to want to keep it secret. The fact that it was her trump card aside, I didn't think it was the kind of thing she'd want everyone to know. But how did you figure out that she was a weaver? Tamamo's death was one thing, but the person who killed the Director

didn’t need to be one.”

“It all came into focus simultaneously for me. Like a chain reaction. I guess once I figure out one thing, it all falls into place. That’s just the kind of person I am: one is all, and all is one. Conversely, that means that until I figure it out, I don’t understand anything at all… Something did trigger it, though. Hime-chan tried to cover her tracks, but it just seemed unnatural that someone would carry around all those threads if they weren’t a weaver. She may have had no choice but to use her lines if she wanted to kill Tamamo without my realizing she’d done so… Still, it was rash.”

Though maybe she just didn’t take me seriously. On that score, I have to admit that Hime-chan wasn’t so crazy after all. If I hadn’t worked backwards from the solution to the locked room, I probably never would’ve figured it out.

“Also, there was the fact that Shiogi was so damn cautious. Her ‘tactics’ were way too elaborate for dealing with any old washout. Like, why not just rely on her material advantage? The answer, of course, being that trying to overwhelm ‘Zigzag’ with superior numbers would be the worst possible strategy.”

“Hmmm.”

“Plus…there’s something fishy about the idea that a washout would try and bamboozle the one and only Jun Aikawa. A nonsense user like me wouldn’t make much of an enemy for the world’s strongest, and neither would plain old ‘Ichihime Yukariki,’ even if she could be her friend. And ‘Zigzag’ was the only likely spot left on the roster for Hime-chan to fill.”

And–above all.

The most important clue came from my conviction that none of the characters around me could ever just be cute or weak or pitiful and nothing

more.

“Well, there you go. But the part about being a washout wasn’t a lie, ya know. Apart from that one skill…she had nothing else going for her.”

“Of course, the fact that you knew about it means…that Zigzag was a skill she acquired before enrolling at the academy…doesn’t it, Jun.”

“Got me there. It was five years ago. I had a friend who was a *failed weaver,* nickname of ‘Zigzag.’ It wasn’t originally meant as a compliment, you with me? Anyway, the two of us did a certain job together. On that occasion we rescued the twelve-year-old Ichihime Yukariki…and since then, Ichihime has idolized the two of us. Me, I didn’t pay too much attention to her, but…”

Was that also when she sustained the injury to her frontal lobe? But that wasn’t the question I needed to ask. There was only one thing to ask now.

“Was the person’s name Yuma Shisei, by any chance?”

“Huh?” Aikawa looked up in surprise. “You know about her? It’s not like she’s all that well-known.”

“No…not really. Anyway, she…”

“Yup. She was Ichihime’s master.” Aikawa smiled cynically. “And a former teacher at Hang ’Em High. Thanks to that connection, Ichihime started going to a middle school affiliated with the place, and here we are. Now, back to the topic at hand. Let’s see, how far had I gotten? Oh right. Her decision to be our fellow suspect. Once again she was right on the money: she figured that even with the door locked, I’d find some way to force my way in… Dammit, she was always a sneaky little minx. You know more about what happened next than I do, so I’ll leave it at that.”

“She didn’t want us to think she was the one who killed the Director… But

what about the mountain of corpses she'd left in the staff room?"

"She must've figured I'd assume that if she wasn't the one who killed the Director, someone else must've killed everyone else too. But that was where she took it too far. Once you and Ichihime were gone, what the hell could I do but come looking for you, so I left the Director's office as well. But I decided to stop by the staff room and *say a quick hello.* I headed down to the floor below… and holy shit. However abnormal Hang 'Em High might be–Ichihime Yukariki was the only person there who could possibly do *that* on her own."

Was–that when it all came out? Her crimes laid bare not by suspicion but by trust. But she could never have let the staff live. In which case Hime-chan's strategy was blown from the start.

…Or.

No, that's probably not how it went. Probably Aikawa–hadn't realized the truth in any real sense until she overheard me and Hime-chan's conversation in the hallway. Whatever she herself may think, I'm pretty sure that's how it went.

That's the kind of person she is.

"But be it the locked room or anything else, I can't believe it would've been opaque. To anyone but you, Jun."

"I was the only one she needed to fool. Otherwise she wouldn't have had any reason to kill you…or would she? You are an irritating son of a bitch."

"…But if she had never summoned you to the school in the first place, you'd never have found out. Choosing to actively deceive you instead of holding onto a secret that might or might not be revealed… Talk about 'getting caught in your own web.'"

"Thing is, she made a promise, a long time ago. When she became Shisei's

disciple. That she would never use Zigzag to kill.”

“But that technique…oh. Originally it was meant for restraining people, for self-defense, huh?”

So that’s why she had to hide the truth from Aikawa, in particular. It probably wasn’t the only reason but went some way towards explaining that bit. A motive for murder is always a complicated tangle of different threads, hard to put into words…but it seemed we could safely say that one of those threads was Hime-chan’s master, Yuma Shisei, and another was Jun Aikawa.

“But the academy wouldn’t allow her to honor that promise…which is why she never should’ve gone to a school like that in the first place. She’s dead already, let it go…stupid kid.”

But Yuma Shisei–knew what would happen.

“When I think about the Director, though, or Shisei, it’s not like I don’t get it. Actually you know what? Never mind, I don’t get it.”

“But–I’m just going to come out and say this, Jun: you’re too soft. Where was your mindreading on this one? In retrospect, whose handiwork could that locked room have been but Hime-chan’s–”

“Not like you figured it out right away.”

“But I’m just incompetent.”

And this was never my riddle to solve in the first place.

“Hanh. Not to sound like Maeda Keijiro Toshimasu, but trusting and being betrayed feels better to me than being suspicious and staying safe.”

There was no visible hint of self-reflection in Aikawa’s indomitable smile. She didn’t even seem to have any regrets, no, nor was she even hurt.

“Jun, you really don’t think this calls for any kind of reconsideration?”

“Not at all. The fact that I care about Ichihime’s got nothing to do with what she’s done. Haha, same reason I’m not even mad that you were going to betray us, Iitan.”

She knew.

“You slippery bastard. Trying to beguile Ichihime like that as soon as your life was on the line. *Why not come live with me*–what the hell? You’d just betrayed her five minutes earlier.”

She knew everything.

“I…didn’t intend to betray her.”

Ultimately, the fact that Aikawa was “soft on her friends” stemmed from an overestimation of the rest of the world on her part. Because she herself was the best of the best, she couldn’t comprehend things like my and Hime-chan’s weakness. And even if she could comprehend it, she couldn’t accept that kind of compromise.

“Whether or not I’m soft, I can’t dismiss her feelings. Anyone would end up like that if they were stuck in a homicidal school like Hang ’Em High. Anyone would want to do what she did. It’s just that Ichihime was the only one with the skills to carry it out, that’s all.”

“Skills…”

“That strange little body of hers is a testament to her poor upbringing. She doesn’t even weigh seventy pounds. You’re friends with Kunagisa, you must get it. Though their circumstances are a little different.”

“…”

“Not that I’m saying you’ve gotta have sympathy for her or anything. But don’t blame her just because you happen to hate people who remind you of yourself.”

“I have no intention of blaming her. This whole thing is none of my business, from start to finish. If you hadn’t gotten me involved, I never would’ve known a thing about any of it.”

“Glad you feel that way.”

Whatever the case, Hime-chan…would probably not have been able to get out of there under her own steam. Zigzag was definitely a useful technique, but fundamentally a defensive one. Except for times when she could set a trap and lie in wait, like she did for Shiogi, it was no different from using an ordinary knife. Without the element of surprise, it was possible to avoid the Zigzag even if you weren’t Aikawa. Which is why–and yes, this was the same as Aikawa’s strategy–she struck at the core first. Though that may have involved a certain amount of resentment as well. Asking for Aikawa’s help after her wholesale slaughter of the faculty…

“But…that doesn’t add up. If she simply wanted to escape, the best thing would’ve been to leave it all to you, Jun. That would’ve been plenty good enough. I guess her primary goal must’ve been to kill the Director after all. If the death of the person she thought of as her master had something to do with the change in directorship, it’s even possible that she enrolled at the school with the intention of killing her all along.”

“They’re not unrelated…but I think you’re really overthinking it.”

If it were just the murder, Hime-chan would’ve been fine on her own. It was the escape after the murder for which she needed Aikawa’s help. She would get Aikawa’s cooperation in fleeing the scene of her crime, and then work it so that

Aikawa would never suspect her. It was a completely self-contradictory, zigzagging plan–but was that the whole extent of Hime-chan's strategy?

"Who knows, maybe she wanted me to figure out that she was the murderer. Maybe she was feeling remorseful, or penitent, something like that? Moronic as that might be."

Uh huh…that seemed most likely. Achieve all her objectives, and have Aikawa render judgment on her to boot. That was such a compelling narrative that even someone like me had a hard time discarding it. If you're going to get killed no matter what–at least let it be by a greater force than yourself.

A confused desire born of desperation.

We don't get to choose our friends, so she at least wanted to choose the enemy that would destroy her.

"She deceived us in order to be found out…but that's too irresponsible for words, Jun."

"Responsibility, huh? What a strange notion."

"Yeah. I…don't really understand it."

"Nope, me neither. Maybe all she wanted was to have some fun with me. There at the very end."

At the very end?

She never intended to survive, never intended to succeed at keeping it hidden… I have a hard time believing that, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. Since I never could comprehend Hime-chan's feelings, even at the end. Same way I still can't comprehend "her" feelings, even now.

–Even thinking about it is pointless.

The history of the losers will never be told.

Soldiers die in battle, and tacticians die in confusion.

And weavers get caught in their own webs.

Ultimately.

Hime-chan wasn't a standin for "her." That alone seems clear to me. It would've taken more than that–to break Tomo Kunagisa.

"Well, with this many hypotheses, one of 'em has to be right," Aikawa said. For a time my hospital room fell silent. She finished the apple, core and all, and reached out her hand towards the basket again. "Hm–this the kind of thing you eat?"

She plucked a 5x5x5 Rubik's Cube, exactly the same size as an apple, from the basket.

"No, that's something Kunagisa left when she came to visit me. It was supposed to help pass the time, but I can't solve those no matter how hard I try, so I just left it in there."

"She came to see you? I thought she couldn't manage stairs on her own, except at home?"

"She said an old friend named 'Hiichan' or something brought her."

"Oh, so that's why you're in such a bad mood, Iitan…" Aikawa solved the cube while she was saying this, never once looking down at her hands, then returned it to the basket of fruit. "Anyway."

From her seemingly apathetic attitude, I knew we were finally getting to the real reason for her visit, and I readied myself.

"This time around I plumbed the depths of your peculiar nature, and I've got

you all figured out.”

“My nature, is it? Well, Shiogi called me a ‘non-actor’ or something.”

“Yeah…that sounds about right. Fact is, I’m regretting it just a little bit. Getting you mixed up in this, I mean. I think it might’ve been a mistake. Don’t you? If you hadn’t been there, at least Shiogi Hagihara and Tamamo Saijo would still be alive. Ichihime wanted to kill as few of the ‘students’ as possible, since they were in the same boat as her. The ‘faculty’ were there because they wanted to be–but the ‘students’ had no choice.”

Shiogi had said something about how there was “no place better suited to me than here,” but–I think I can safely say. That there was. Shiogi and Tamamo just didn’t know it. They just couldn’t find other objectives or motivations. And I just wasn’t able to provide them, that’s all.

“But blaming me for their deaths is over the line. It’s got nothing to do with me, does it?”

“You’re constantly surrounded by calamity, and people are constantly dying around you. You–how can I put this, you *make people feel like they can’t settle down.* You make them anxious. So the people around you are forced out of their comfort zones–and as a result they let their guard down. That’s exactly why I used you for this assignment–but that aspect of your nature doesn’t discriminate between friend and foe. Ichihime got caught up in it too. She killed Tamamo for the sake of *your* safety, and she didn’t kill Shiogi because she’d ‘found out the truth,’ she killed her to save you; you’d let yourself be captured so Hime-chan could escape, and Shiogi *had you trapped like a rat*–doesn’t that sound more plausible? Ichihime only wanted to hide her crime from me, her friend. And, locked room or no locked room, once the corpses were discovered she was going to come under suspicion no matter what.”

“I see. I guess that’s another way of looking at it.”

“Someone who shakes people up just by being there, who makes others lose sight of themselves just by being there… Individuals like you aren’t all that rare. When they’re around you can’t settle down, you get irritated, things don’t go like they usually do… Psychology has a way of explaining such people: in terms of ‘defects.’ The people observing you have similar deficiencies, so they start to feel like theirs are being pointed out to them, and it shakes them up. Some people decide that that feeling is love, and some decide it’s hostility. The former want to commiserate with you, while the latter hate you for being similar to them. And you’re the top of the line in that department. You have no personality, so you’re not similar to anyone–but you *lack so much* that you’re similar to everyone. Which acts on their non-conscious minds; your conscious non-action undermines them. And *on top of that,* you exploit it cleverly. You ward things off without putting up any kind of ward, you ingratiate yourself without any ingrained defenses. You let others pass, deflect, avoid, evade. You use nonsense to run away, flee, escape. Even though they can’t settle down when you’re around–no one can touch you. It’s pretty much like being around a ghost or a devil. That’s why the machinery goes crazy around you, and people’s switches end up getting flipped. Same was true back in April, and back in May.”

“I said this to Shiogi as well, but…you’re overestimating me.” I shook my head slowly. “I’m nothing special. I just wander around without ever knowing what’s going on.”

“If there’s any silver lining…” Aikawa continued undaunted, totally ignoring my attempt to vindicate myself, “it’s that you have no goals. To be perfectly honest, you freak me out a little. If you develop any kind of intentionality… If you start heading *somewhere,* who the hell knows what you’ll be capable of? When that happens, the only ones who’ll be able to avoid your influence are

people like Zerozaki, who're absolutely identical to you. Everyone who's even the slightest bit different…will go off the rails, every last one of them. It'll be so much worse than it is now, you'll drag the people around you into your orbit and the accidents'll spiral out of control."

Sure–like before.

When I destroyed Tomo Kunagisa.

"Sounds kind of like a horror novel."

Aikawa's expression didn't change at my joke–

She whipped her finger up…

"So I think it wouldn't be such a bad idea to kill you right now."

And snapped it back down as she said that.

"–"

Nothing–happened.

Nothing…happened.

"That's a harsh joke."

"Joke? Did you say joke?" Aikawa put on a show of exaggerated surprise. "Right, right. Keep telling yourself that."

"…"

"Haha. If you were gone, who'd set up my punchlines for me?" Then, cynically, "'Kay, pal, I'm outta here." Standing up, she folded the chair and put it back where she'd found it. And just for good measure, she took another apple from the basket. "Until the threads of fate entwine once more. May your future hold most excellent misfortune, and a pathetic excuse for good fortune."

She started walking out of the room.

My final question was directed at her back.

“Why did Hime-chan–”

“Huh? Why did Hime-chan what?”

“Why do you think Hime-chan called me *that*?”

“Come on, it’s not hard. Or do you,” Aikawa turned the question back on me, “not understand why she hid the truth about Zigzag from you? Mental problems aside, it wouldn’t’ve been inconvenient for her if you knew she was a weaver, and yet she played the regular old washout right up till the last second. Do you not understand why she really did that?”

“No, I don’t.” Even though it was my own question, I hung my head and averted my eyes from Aikawa’s. “Wasn’t it just that she wanted me to underestimate her? By playing the stupid high schooler, she could keep me off my guard.”

“Not even close, you moronnn. Hanh, basically, she conflated the two of you. Mister Somebody, who resembles nobody and so can resemble anybody. She projected you,” Aikawa sneered. “Same way you projected her onto Tomo Kunagisa. Talk about ships in the goddamn night.”

Just as I saw Tomo Kunagisa in Hime-chan.

Hime-chan saw something in me?

“Think I’ll ever see her again?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you two together again soon, whether you like it or not.”

And with that, the contractor disappeared from my sight. As always, throwing my mind into disarray as she did so. While she may not have done what she

usually did, further solving something I'd already solved, she did leave me with a whole new host of concerns.

Dammit…the Princess of Intimation, the Empress of Insinuation, Her Majesty the Queen of Suggestion. Thanks a lot, leaving me with a lapful of ambiguous and possibly spurious foreshadowing. Tamamo was one thing, but I'd wanted to point out that maybe the reason Shiogi got killed was because Aikawa had gone for a costume change.

"So does the whole 'no personality' thing mean people get to say whatever they want? Everyone expects too much of me… Gimme a break already."

Even though I'm nothing more than an introverted nineteen year old with no imagination who's maybe a little on the voluble side.

While I was pondering this, the nurse came in with a tray of food, almost like she'd tagged in when Aikawa left. Or more likely Aikawa had sensed the approach of the nurse and departed accordingly. She's like a ninja.

"That cool babe with the fashion sense of a stand user who was just leaving your room? Never seen her before. She come to visit you in the hospital, Ii-Ii?" the nurse asked with keen interest, looking over her shoulder towards the door. "She your big sister, Ii-Ii? Your cousin?"

She seemed convinced we were related.

"Oh…she's my girlfriend."

"Whaa?"

She didn't even try to hide her doubt.

"See, she's madly in love with me. It's a real problem, barging in on me even here. I was hoping for some time alone while I was in the hospital, at least."

“Right, right. G-o-o-o-tcha.”

The nurse clearly didn’t believe a word I said.

“It may not have seemed like it, but when it’s just the two of us she’s really something. She’ll do literally anything I say.”

“Sure, sure, of c-o-o-o-urse. You lucky dog, you. Ii-Ii, what a stuuuud.”

She lined up plastic dishes on the table as she said this.

“Lovey dovey~♪ kissy kissy~♪”

What the hell is this hospital doing, hiring a nurse with so much personality? I was getting kind of annoyed (on top of which I was feeling emptied out), so I decided to change the subject.

“Excuse me, nurse, but do you read detective novels?”

“I’m a nurse *practitioner,*” she corrected me. Sounds to me like the difference between a tactics expert and a tactical expert, but I guess she was a particular person. “Sure, I read them, por qua?”

“Because it’s Quiz Time.” I picked up the envelope Aikawa had left behind, and as I examined its contents, I continued, “Say there’s a room somewhere. The door has a biometric hand scanner, so from the outside it can only be locked or unlocked by the room’s owner. One day, you and your two friends, the three of you, visit that room. The door is locked and it won’t open, so you force it open, and inside you discover the dismembered corpse of the room’s owner.”

“Ahh, a locked-room murder. This really brings me back.” The nurse smiled. “A handprint, huh… Sounds like *Lupin.*”

“So, how did the culprit pull off this impossible task?”

“Let me think. A-ha, got it. That’s an easy one.” After she had finished laying out my meal, the nurse turned to face me. “The murderer dismembered the body inside the room, then took one of the hands and used it to lock the room from the outside. Dismembering the whole body was camouflage, because in fact the killer only needed to sever one hand. In other words, the ‘key to the room’ was just the palm, and directly after death the scanner would still respond to it like it would to a living thing. Teheh, talk about a helping hand.”

“…”

“You’d be all shaken up if there was a dismembered corpse right there in front of you, so you wouldn’t realize at first glance that one little piece was missing. Yeah. So the culprit must be one of the three who discovered the body. It’d have to be the last person who entered the room, right? He or she could take the severed hand out of whatever it was hidden in, a pouch or something, and put it in a corner of the room while the other two were still in shock at the sight of the body. Wow, that’s a mighty gaudy trick.”

“…”

As I listened to the nurse’s answer, my gaze remained fixed on the contents of the envelope. Bundles and bundles of money–and a single photo. It was the photo that Hime-chan must’ve recovered from my clothes at the same time she took the campus map.

The photo of Hime-chan smiling that honest, genuine smile.

“I’ll get you two together again soon–”

Now I see, Ms. Contractor.

Really got my fucking number–don’t you.

You knew exactly the right thing to do.

I don’t know what Hime-chan was feeling when she took it from me. I don’t know, but I have an inkling. You might call it a memento. A memory, of when Aikawa and Hime-chan first met. A memory called the past, so unlike the future–and which, unlike the future, will never be ambiguous.

“Hmm? Come on now, I answer your dumb little quiz for you, and you just sit there gazing at some photo like you want to eat it instead of this meal I brought you? Who’s it of, Ii-Ii? Your girlfriend?”

“Does this look like my girlfriend?” How the hell does this nurse see me? “It’s not. She’s…just a friend.”

“You were looking at it pretty affectionately for that. The way someone looks at a daughter, or some sort of disciple.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe so.”

Snatching this photo from me was the one pure trick Hime-chan played on me, unrelated to either crime or murder. An act devoid of malice. Hime-chan wanted it for herself, so she took it from me. In which case, she’d have to come to me to get it back again. I didn’t know where she was now or what she was doing–nor did I know what Aikawa planned to do with her… But with those odds, giving up and admitting I’d been fooled didn’t seem so bad.

Hime-chan could never take *her* place–but, well, there were a lot of things I wanted to teach her anyway.

Yeah, like how to use nonsense, for instance.

What Hime-chan needed was a negative example–like me.

“Hmm. Okay. Anyway, I don’t care about any of that. What about my answer to the quiz? I got it right, didn’t I? C’mon, Ii-Ii, tell me already.”

The nurse peered intently down at me. I callously waved her away before

responding. Though you don't need me to tell you whether or not she was correct, of course; it goes without saying. However wide the world may be–

There's only one person in it so soft that she couldn't solve such a simple quiz.

The world's strongest softie.

"You're totally wrong. What a horrible person, suspecting your friends like that."

"And you're totally full of shit."

"Maybe."

Afterword–

Other people's will can at times be incomprehensible, and sometimes intrusive or even quite patronizing, but is it just my imagination or does any conviction clear enough to merit the label "will" exert a clear pressure on people who come into contact with it? Well, most of the time it probably is just my imagination, but if we try replacing "will" with "pressure," it works surprisingly well in a lot of instances. And, conversely, if you examine any of your own perfectly innocent actions, you'll find that even those exert an unintentional influence on the people around you, which is honestly kind of shocking. Thinking of yourself as the center of the universe is the height of folly, but by the same token, doing whatever you please as though your actions have no effect whatsoever on the rest of the world might well be the depths of folly. If we accept that our world results from the collisions of various pressures with one another, then it must be said to exist in an extremely tenuous balance, like a balloon that'll pop if you poke it with a needle–or maybe it's like walking on spider webs–and for that very reason, a single individual's will can bring that equilibrium crashing down. This is very much not a meaningless exaggeration, of course, but that being said, you only very rarely have an opportunity to observe the kind of larger-than-life person who remains unaffected by those pressures, so I ought to think twice about acting like I know what I'm talking about.

This volume is chapter three of the *Zaregoto* series. As you can see, it has neither theme nor thesis, nor is there anything resembling a will to be found within its pages. The charlatan who calls himself the Nonsense User simply tells

it all according to what suits him, leaving a trail of contradictions and false logic in his wake. It's a tale of non-action, so to speak, free from all worldly attachments. Affirmation becomes negation, escape becomes surrender, respect becomes contempt. A nonsense user could never teach anyone anything in the first place, so I was tempted to make the subtitle "The Nonsense User's Dishtowel," but I stopped myself at the last minute. This volume marks a turning point in the *Zaregoto* series–would tie things up nicely if it were true, but unfortunately it's not. The words just keep on coming same as ever, marching straight down the road of silliness. So in that spirit, this has been *SUSPENSION: Kubitsuri High School - The Nonsense User's Disciple.*

With this book, the NISIOISIN paperback library has finally reached three volumes, and I somehow feel like I've reached the end of stage one. In getting to this point I've received kind assistance from all quarters, not least of all from the illustrator, take, and the fine people at Kodansha's paperback division, and these days I'm living only to repay those debts. And of course I'm also grateful for the opportunity to repay my readers by continuing to write these novels, so thank you all very much. Until next time.

NISIOISIN

Suspension 1

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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西尾維新
NISIOISIN
Illustration
take
サイコロジカル
兎吊木垓輔の戯言殺し
講談社
NOVELS

~Translated by suiminchuudoku

目次

一日目(1)……正解の終わり　23

一日目(2)……罰　亡　罰　63

一日目(3)……青　い　檻　105

一日目(4)……微笑亡夜襲　181

二日目(1)……今更の始まり　217

二日目(2)……感　染　犯　罪

二日目(3)……偽善者日記

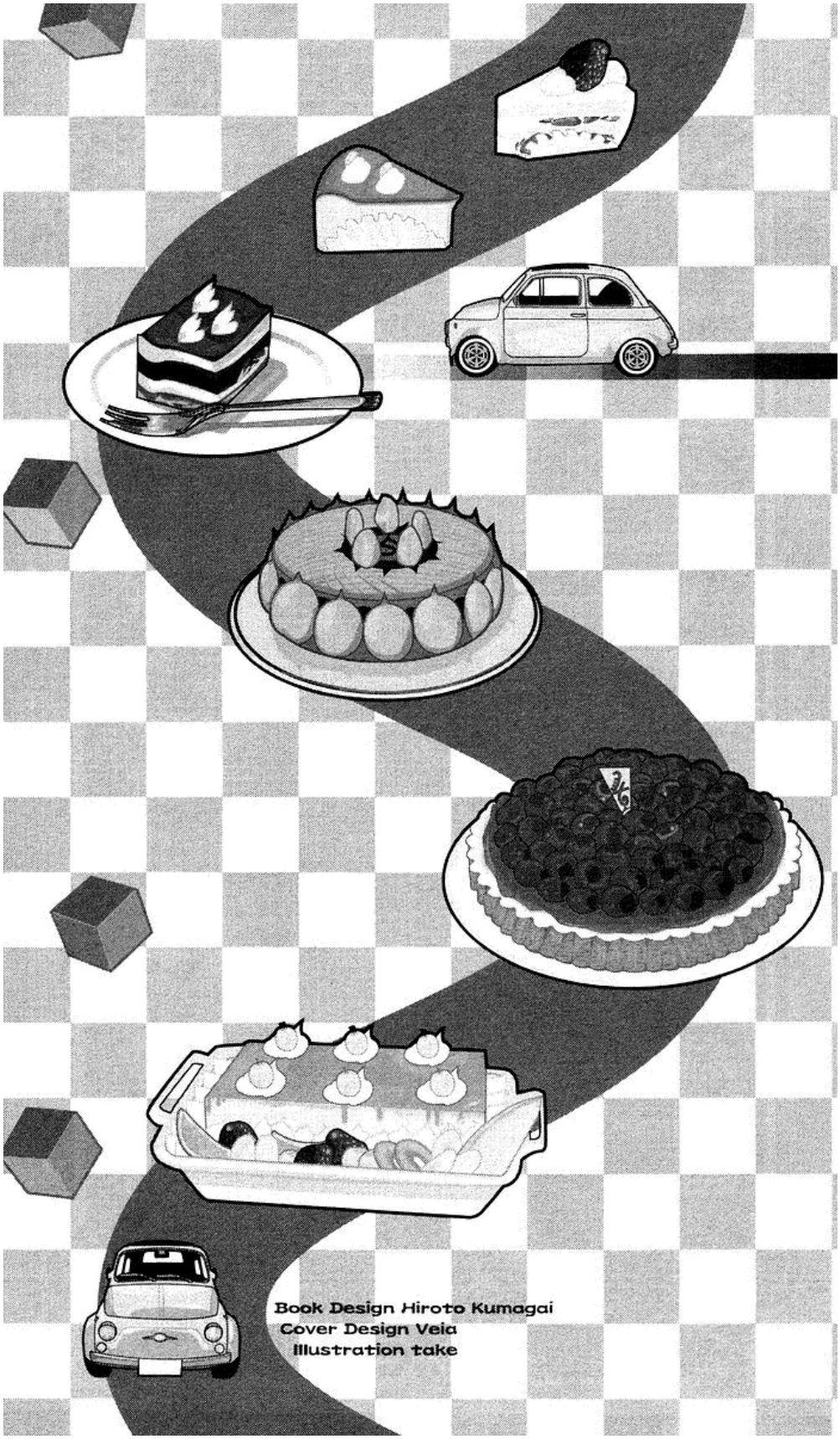
二日目(4)……死　願　症

二日目(5)……首　輪　物　語

二日目(6)……たったひとつの冴えないやりかた

後　日　談……負け犬達の沈黙

＊「二日目(2)……感染犯罪」以降が下巻の内容となります。



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登場人物紹介

玖渚友（くなぎさ・とも）――――――――――――――――――――≪死線の蒼≫。

鈴無音々（すずなし・ねおん）――――――――――――――――――保護者。

ぼく（語り部）――――――――――――――――――――――――十九歳。

斜道卿壱郎（しゃどう・きょういちろう）――――――――≪堕落三昧≫。

大垣志人（おおがき・しと）――――――――――――――――――助手。

宇瀬美幸（うせ・みさち）――――――――――――――――――――秘書。

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春日井春日（かすがい・かすが）――――――――――――――――研究局員。

兎吊木垓輔（うつりぎ・がいすけ）――――――――――――≪害悪細菌≫。

哀川潤（あいかわ・じゅん）――――――――――――――――――請負人。

石丸小唄（いしまる・こうた）――――――――――――――――大泥棒。

零崎愛識（ぜろざき・いとしき）――――――――――――――――侵入者。

天才の二面は明らかに
醜聞(しゅうぶん)を起こし得る才能である。――
――芥川龍之介

Prologue

One aspect of genius is clearly
The gift of producing scandals.
-Akutagawa Ryuunosuke

"You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?"

Utsurigi abruptly, without any warning or lead-in, as if natural and preordained, without a even bit of hesitation or faltering, without a moment of thought or a trace of tact, yet not particularly with pressure or haughtiness, as if looking up at or looking down upon, slickly and smoothly as if expected, said.

I did not answer.

However, silently, I looked through the glasses of the man who was once called *Green Green Green (Malignant Bacteria)*, Utsurigi Gaisuke. Just silently, and ever silently, we looked at each other, as if facing off.

As if he were not not expecting me to answer at all from the start, Utsurigi continued his lines.

"When it comes down to it – her very existence is, for you, a cause of *hatred*, and I think she is simply an object of hatred for you. Hatred, yes, hatred. You can't deny it, can you? Of course you can't. *If only Kunagisa Tomo never existed*, you must have thought, and you won't be allowed to say you never have. *Not I*, of course, but rather yourself won't allow it. Yes – frankly, if that *Dead Blue (The Blue of the Verge of Death)* had never existed, I won't say happiness, but you may have been able to live a more ordinary life."

I did not answer.

"– have you thought about it? With that intelligent brain of yours, which was prized and treasured within the ultimate research laboratory facility, the ER3 system, that intellect that is placed so naturally among the possessions of mankind's strongest, have you just once thought about it?

What Kunagisa Tomo is called *Dead Blue* by us, such a violent, cursing name, have you thought about that reason?"

I did not answer.

"Yes, even that, a small interest or a smidgen of curiosity is all the reason needed for such a tiny and narrow question, yet your mind never wandered toward it. If that is not *escape* or *fear* or *concern* toward Kunagisa Tomo, then what entirely would you say it is? Your entire life is based on fleeing from Kunagisa Tomo. The moment you encountered her you've entered into a rally to flee with all your legs' might. For example, remember. Yes, remember, the you of old. The you of old had enough of a *characteristic* such that even if you may not be able to puff out your chest with pride you still had no need to crawl along the ground in such a pathetic way, an *individualism* that caused you not to mesh into others, did you not?"

I did not answer.

"For example, even I – this Utsurigi Gaisuke has a certainly notorious alias *Green Green Green*, yet compared to *Dead Blue* it's still a hundred times more normal. It's so much more normal I may shed tears. For some reason you know of Ayanami Hyou, but even that bundle of evil, harboring specs comparable to Kunagisa Tomo, that seeker is still simply called *Cheetah (Vicious Beast)*. No, no. No, no, no, even before that. Even before that, have you ever pondered? Why Kunagisa Tomo, who was fourteen at the time, who is not not even fully twenty, why she, the small existence of a girl, or child, or even infant, was able to gather us and lead us. Yes, Kunagisa Tomo has ridiculous skills that clearly merit number one, such that calling her number two would be some sort of bad joke – no, I should call it **warfaring** that she had, but even then, she was not by a significant margin number one. Yet even then, she was without a doubt our leader. It was impossible that our leader be anyone other than her. Regarding that, you have ever once been fascinated by it?"

I did not answer.

"– that's because all of us knew. All of us understood. The eight members other than Kunagisa Tomo all, individually, ignoring what each of us may have thought ourselves, each and every one of us had the utmost knowledge and recognition. That myself, even this incredible self, alone, would never even possibly overcome this *Dead Blue*. That clump of

challenging spirit and indomitable will, who would never acknowledge someone being better, that extreme egoist Hinemosu Suzu, even her, had no choice but to accept it. That is why *Dead Blue* – no, we may have been able to surpass her. We may be able to surpass her, at least. If that was all it would take, that would be simple. I don't know about the other seven and I don't really care to, but at the very least, **I** could. If I were to simulate it, it would be an easy confirmation. However, I have never thought about surpassing *Dead Blue*. To be honest, to be more open, I should say *I don't want to surpass her*. Forget that, I don't even want to imagine it. If I'm to do that and regret it, then I'd rather stop and retreat. We all sensed it, that to step further would be enter an abnormal dimension. That's why, that's why she's called *Dead Blue*. That's why – have you ever met her brother, Kunagisa Nao?"

I did not answer.

"I haven't encountered him that often, but even then I can tell that he is rather normal, that it's clear he's an ordinary person. Do you get what that means? They're made of similar genes but there's an oppressive difference between Kunagisa Nao and Kunagisa Tomo, and what could have caused that? It means it's not a problem of genes or DNAs or anything of that foredestined sort. In other words, Kunagisa Tomo is a special abnormality. Special among special. Singular among singular, unusual among unusual, that is her, Kunagisa Tomo. Yet even then she's so out-standing that you might think it's just a joke, yet so terrible that it can't be a joke, that's the type of special abnormality she is. An oddity without comparison. You've got quite an interesting and bizarre personality, but you still can't think of yourself as stranger than Kunagisa Tomo, can you? compared to her, you're still and still, still and still and still and still within the bounds of a normal person. Although that may be slightly uncomfortable for you."

I did not answer.

"For example everyone would understand if we use mankind's strongest as an intermediary for describing *ceasing*. There can't be anyone who would oppose it. That is, after all, what is fundamentally meant by a bright, red light. However Kunagisa Tomo isn't red, in fact quite the opposite. She's the color blue, like the healthy sky, a cheerful, bright color that forgives everything and allows all. Yet regardless, her existence calls out to you and I both to cease forever and ever. Isn't that what it means? In the

end, you've not taken a single step. Six years is the time you've been in that moment you met her, not learning a thing, not attaining a thing, not destroying a thing not loving a thing, and not finding a thing not abandoning a thing, six years of years and months without limit, simply, aimlessly and meaninglessly and insignificantly ceased. You've ceased the whole time. Isn't that what it means?"

I did not answer.

"That's why *Dead Blue* is a subject of hate for you. A subject of enmity. A subject of malice, and a subject of murderous will. That has to be the case, logically. The existence that definitively changed your life. No, that's wrong – the existence that definitively **did not change** your life. The existence that didn't allow change. Of course you're not a person that's just stupid and foolish and underhanded. You're stupid but sharp, foolish but smart, underhanded but clever. Within a year you'll recognize that oppressive truth. That *Dead Blue* is just a *Killer Application (Dangerous Element)* to you. That's why I ran. That's why I ran. That's why I ran. To protect myself, I fled into that enormous, unexpected system as nothing but a symbol. I don't have any right to complain to you about that with a noisy mouth. You do technically have freedom so I'll respect that. However that escape, it wasn't even able to formulate the shape of *escape*, and brought no change to you, and as a result now you're exactly where you started, right next to Kunagisa Tomo. The same as you were six years ago, right next to Kunagisa Tomo. You must have thought? You must have wondered? And you must have known? If Kunagisa Tomo never existed. If Kunagisa Tomo never existed. If that verge of death never existed."

If I had not seen.

If I had not seen, what would have happened.

I did not answer.

"If you did not have *the ability to read people* – although that's a delusion that is far too great, and only a delusion that is both peasant and unpleasant. If not a delusion then nonsense. You saw the verge of death, and you met Kunagisa Tomo. And if that were all it would have been fine, or perhaps it would not have been better, but unfortunately you were mesmerized by her self, and beyond that, you mesmerized her self. That's so marvelous and horrible that it's unprecedented, and unheard of and describable as the ultimate bad luck. You probably realize it sufficiently,

but I don't know of any worse luck. There's no misfortune greater than mutual feelings and mutual love, even moreso when it comes to a pair of existences as rare as the two of you. Don't you think? Because of your soul, which feels for her, because of her soul which feels for you, how many victims have been created? How many were wounded and fallen and rotted and buried around you two?"

I remembered them.

And them.

I did not answer.

"Just thinking back on your life a bit proves it. It's proven even without thinking back without looking back. Remember your life just a hair. Washing blood with blood, wiping meat with meat, paying for bones with bones, that's the road you've walked. Hmph. That's quite picturesque. Yes, a *symbol* –. Speaking of symbols, I touched on it a bit earlier but *Cheetah* – Ayanami Hyou. He's a boy that was the only one of us who's the same age as Kunagisa Tomo. Fourteen-years-old when *Cluster* was formed. In other words, he's the same ilk as *Dead Blue*, bearing the cross on his back titled *A genius lacking in experience*, and although I won't say *that's why*, he was the most intimate with Kunagisa Tomo among the members. Intimate. I feel a bit uncomfortable saying this as a third party, much less as someone who calls himself an equal of Ayanami Hyou, but *Cheetah* was definitely in love with *Dead Blue*. He was mesmerized, and seduced. Geniuses are always alone and isolated, but that doesn't mean every genius loves that. Love of compatriots – love of the same ilk – love of the same family – or perhaps love of the same type. Not that it matters what it's called. Anyways that's how it was. You've probably heard of Ayanami Hyou's searching skills from Kunagisa Tomo, so there's no need for me to say anything, right?"

I did not answer.

"Including the leader Kunagisa Tomo we were nine, and if a single one of us were to have dropped out the group wouldn't have been able to remain intact, yet even then I can say the most central were Kunagisa Tomo, and Ayanami Hyou. If we call Kunagisa Tomo the CPU then Ayanami Hyou was the monitor. Of course, of the nine members, each and every one of us were renegades of different genres, so saying that someone was the most important or someone was the second most talented, that sort of hierarchy was impossible to call, and personally I didn't think there was a need for it

either. Regardless, for Ayanami Hyou to be attracted to Kunagisa Tomo could be called fated. You understand the reason though, don't you? It's because it's you that you understand, don't you? Or perhaps you and only you can understand. So, here's a question. Do you think Kunagisa Tomo responded to Ayanami Hyou's feelings, his soul, his words?"

I did not answer.

"The answer is no. Kunagisa Tomo didn't respond at all. Surprising isn't it? Of course it's surprising. At the very least, to you it's a surprising truth. And beyond that, it's not the best of circumstances. Because of this truth, because of just this one truth, every action taken by Kunagisa Tomo toward you, one by one, begins to hold a different meaning. Flipped over – yes, upside-down would be a good expression. Although such details are not within my bounds of knowledge. Anyways, no matter how you might look at it, Kunagisa Tomo didn't respond to Ayanami Hyou's feelings. As for Ayanami Hyou, that pleasant genius probably predicted that from the start, so he didn't approach Kunagisa Tomo any more than necessary. Didn't approach – out of necessity. Of course he didn't do what you're doing now, this foolish, cute play of distancing oneself further than necessary from the verge of death. ... Hmph, that's the same as then and now. Even after being plunged into prison by none other than *Dead Blue* herself, *Cheetah* still remains in contact with Kunagisa Tomo. Irresolute or effeminate or however you may want to call it – no, that's probably not the case. That sort of young one understands through instincts – solitude doesn't just belong to themselves. Though when you get to my age you start to forget that. – By the way, you're the same age as Kunagisa Tomo, and Ayanami Hyou, aren't you? Nineteen?"

I did not answer.

"Then you must know through instinct. Of course you must, the difference between solitude and isolation. The disparity between heresy and extremities. Yes, with regards to that, what you think is generally correct. Utsurigi Gaisuke will say correct! I shall present to you a bouquet of correctness. With regards to that, you have no need to have general notions, not that there's any place for that to begin with. Rest assured. There are other things that you must fret over. That's the case for anything, but there being multitudes of things simultaneously in multitudes of places isn't favorable when it comes to processing. That's

what I think. You have walked a road filled with copious amounts of misery and distress, but the road-less desert stretching out before you is overflowing with even more mortification. I'll forewarn you about that here."

What Utsurigi wanted to say.

I did not know.

I did not answer.

"This Utsurigi Gaisuke ate out of the same bowl as Kunagisa Tomo for a duration of four years, so there is none other that Utsurigi Gaisuke can warn you about. Anything else would be without exaggeration useless. It'd be troublesome if you were to rely on me to escape from the existence of Kunagisa Tomo. Because I've never crossed over to **that side**. You've already crossed past the verge of death. That's why neither I nor for instance Ayanami Hyou would be able to provide you with words of assistance. If there is a word of advice I could provide, it would simply be words of comfort – "*It's too late*" "*Too bad*" "*How pitiable*"."

What Utsurigi did not want to say.

I did not know.

I did not answer.

"You've already, a distant time ago, a far away time ago, in your eternal past approached the end. That means you're at a dead end. Whether you've realized it yourself, whether you're aware or unaware or conscious or subconscious, isn't something that I can determine from my vantage point. However I think that may have been for the best. It may be cruel to you but I fundamentally support Kunagisa Tomo. She was never enamored by me, but I was enamored by her. I was attracted to her, a whole block of years my junior. That's why I can be satisfied if Kunagisa Tomo finds happiness. But that's the same for you, isn't it? You, too, along with me and Ayanami, can not care as long as Kunagisa Tomo is fine with it. Everything else – yourself included, doesn't matter."

I did not answer.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of. Not something to be ashamed of for even a bit or smidgen. That's the level of seduction and attraction commanded by that Kunagisa Tomo. The beautiful words *revere* and *worship* fit her perfectly. They fit so perfectly they can't be removed. Precisely in that way, with a bit of exaggeration, we can say she's the object

of religious worship. You and I are not alone in that compared to Kunagisa Tomo we're but boring objects. It doesn't matter whether we're dead or alive, and I can say that without bitterness or cynicism. If she's One, then we're One of Quadrillion, and if we're One, then she's Quadrillion. If for her happiness one or two victims are made, if several lives *cease*, then that's nothing, it's so trivial that it's nothing. I don't care about for the greater good or for the greater happiness. That's not a legitimate phrase in front of her. And you probably feel the same. You must be the same."

I did not answer.

"*Dead Blue* calls to us. That beautiful voice calls to us, the warfront soldiers. Even now, if you listen carefully, we can hear her noble voice– "*Make Hell the Hell named Hell. Massacre the Massacre named Massacre. Guilt the Guilt named Guilt. Despair the Despair named Despair. Confuse the Confusion named Confusion, dominate the Domination named Domination. Don't hold back, none can obstruct us. Be proud, we, of this beautiful world. This is the bedroom of the verge of death, rampage all you want as the verge of death allows it–*" it makes your heart quiver. It makes your hair rise all over your body. She's too much of a ruler. We're not talking about taking over the world, the world is simply a disposable toy for *Dead Blue*, an existence only until she bores of it. Of course, that goes for us, too. To her, I'm just a toy that was slightly useful. –I definitely don't know how you are to her – but because I don't know I ask: so, what sort of toy are you to her?"

I did not answer.

"We have to be her toys. I'll repeat again that it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Being a factor on her road is something to be proud of in this world. There's nothing to feel inferior about, so you should be more boastful about it. Slaves have the happiness of slaves, they say. Boast at me, that I'm more useful to Kunagisa Tomo than you by far, isn't that wonderful – or something. I have enough gumption to accept that much. Why're you always fidgeting about? Being used and thrown away by her is a point of honor. Being stepped on and crushed by her is a point of honor. What're you so ashamed of?"

I did not answer.

"I – *Green Green Green* once violated the world under her orders. *Cheetah. Double-flick (Two-Layered World)*, everyone brought revolution to the world. We didn't seek to be heroes. We didn't seek to be called demons. I

had but one wish – we had but one wish. That we wanted to be useful to *Dead Blue* – that we wanted to live for her. I'm not lying in saying that was it. With regards to the exploits of rewriting the world, with regards to the divine work of recreating history, I have no thoughts whatsoever. Crushing what was called by the public a Mansion of Demons brought about no satisfactory sense of justice, and splattering the bits and pieces of an innocent little girl's body caused no guilt to bubble forth. Acquiring a mountain of treasure didn't satisfy any material craving, and acting out a happy end at the end of a tearjerking tragedy caused no emotions to bubble forth. None of that matters to me. My goal – no, my **reason** was before and after always singular. Singular, without choosing or losing. Singular, without jesting or joking. Blessings to her. Happiness to her. Amusement to her. Joy to her. I, in the name of *Green Green Green* – destroyed everything for her. Destroyed, and destroyed what I had destroyed, and destroyed once more the things I had destroyed on top of destroying. I'll do anything for her. You should be the same. You'd do anything for her – you'd abandon anything for her. You'd crush the world for her. You too, for her – would kill yourself. Isn't that right?"

I did not answer.

"However, – however that's a hypothesis and theory that only works when Kunagisa Tomo, that *Dead Blue* would actually achieve happiness. Kunagisa Tomo herself is the only one who can determine whether something falls under the vague expression called happiness – but that's all the same. The same as me being mesmerized by Kunagisa Tomo, and even more than you being mesmerized by Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo is mesmerized by you. From my perspective I can only see from within the castle of reasoning, but she would probably do anything for you. She would listen to anything you say. She would forgive anything you do. If you were to tell her to die, she would probably die. Just as you're obedient to her, she's obedient to you. That's what's called mutual feelings, mutual love – but, in that case we can think this way, too. What if you and *Dead Blue* are similar and share a similar relationship, then just as your time has ceased by being with Kunagisa Tomo, then what if, just the same, because of you, Kunagisa Tomo's time has also ceased–"

I.

I. I.

I did not answer.

"Of course, as I said, this is just a theory. A theory, one with no materials and wrought by thinking after having the answer in front of me. Yet it's a theory with quite a bit of truthfulness, one that's worth thinking about. No matter how much blessedness and accursedness are but relative to each person's perceptions, and that reports of observations by third-party people are just meddlesome delusions that are neither greater than or less than intrusive, those that have failed to die and cease themselves with their own hands cannot attain happiness no matter what sort of meaning you may attribute to the word. Just as you cannot attain happiness no matter what, does that also mean that Kunagisa Tomo also will never taste true happiness? Just as the singular existence Kunagisa Tomo is a reason for you, couldn't it be said that you are just the very same singular existence to Kunagisa Tomo? Then *ceasing* is a paradox, spiraling, returning to Kunagisa Tomo through you. The verge of death becomes a dead end by overcoming herself. For as long as she's with you. For as long as you exist."

I.

I. I.

I did not answer.

"Yet here's why it's even more terrible, it's that this doesn't mean you need just disappear. Let's say I kill you here and now. Utsurigi Gaisuke murders you. This isn't just a hypothetical that lacks realism. As I said earlier, I've got no problems murdering for *Dead Blue*. At the very extreme least, I'm mesmerized by her enough for that. That's why, for instance, I delete and annihilate your existence so that not a shred remains. However. That also means that I'd simultaneously be annihilating Kunagisa Tomo. A temporary stoppage simply becomes an eternal stoppage. That's not all. Nothing changes, in fact things would get worse. How terrifying. How disgusting. The status quo must be abandoned in order to move toward the ideal, yet that ideal simply results in the worst, and the next-most ideal strategy doesn't exist. You're done for. And Kunagisa Tomo is also done for. From here onwards, the two of you will continue to end the eternity of time. Not just done for, but continuing to end. I can't think of a better phrase than brutal. You, and you two, are really pitiful existences. That's why, I have to ask you. I have that right, and you have the obligation to

answer. So please, truthfully, without falsifying anything, without leaving open any crack that may invite suspicion, just simply, will you answer me?”

Utsurigi said.

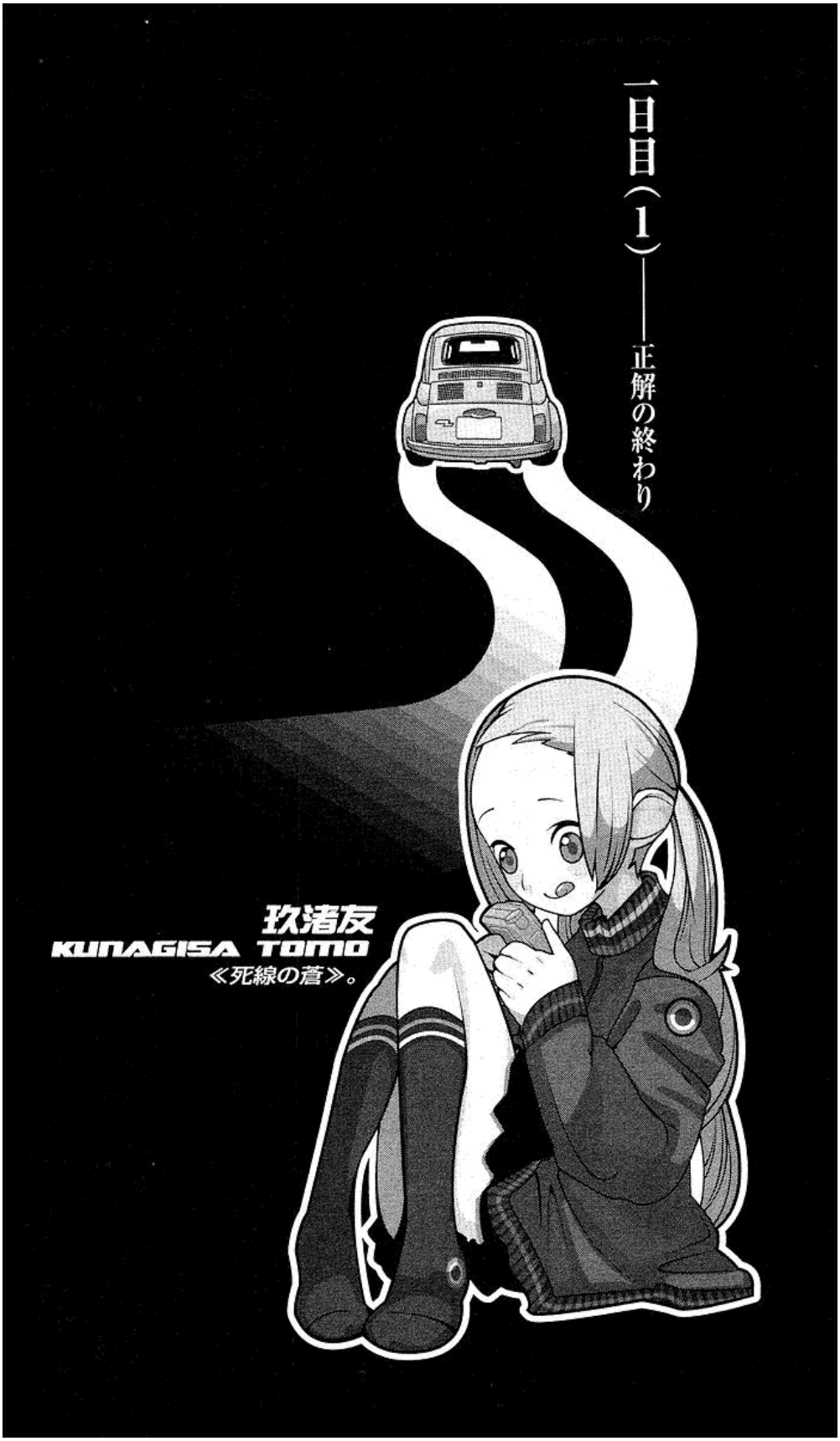
“Don’t you actually hate Kunagisa Tomo?”

I.

I. I.

I–

一日目（1）——正解の終わり



Day 1 (1)

The End of Correctness

0

Now then.
Hello, everybody.
Please accompany me for just a little while.

1

"So, Tomo. His – what was his name? Utsurigi, what sort of guy is he entirely?"

It was a borrowed car, so I should really not be talking and distracting myself from driving, but around me was just one person and one dog, and nary a single car in sight, and it was so rural that one could assume that even public construction had not touched this place in the past ten years. Actually, it may not even be a mistake to call this a dirt path. There were no stoplights and probably no danger of being in an accident, but even so I lowered the speed a bit, as I asked Kunagisa Tomo, sitting in the assistant driver's seat.

Kunagisa looked fascinated as she tilted her head to the side, "Uni?" and then, "Didn't I tell you? Ii-chan."

"I thought I sat down and explained to you a lot about Sacchan."

"No, I never heard."

I responded, but if Kunagisa said so, then I probably did receive an explanation. Kunagisa Tomo's memory is as accurate as a precision machine, and my memory is inaccurate enough to require precise

investigation. In other words of in other words, I forget things brilliantly. However, forgetting is the same as not knowing.

"Umm. Sacchan, right-."

"Start there. Why *Sacchan*? He is Utsurigi Gaisuke, right? How do you turn his name into *Sacchan*?"

"Hmm... I see."

In any case I accepted her explanation, but still pondered her naming sense. After all, how is it to make a nickname of a nickname?

"*Sacchan* from *Saikin* (Bacteria)... sounds like an elementary school kid being bullied."

"Mmm. Sacchan wasn't like that, though. If anything that's more Chii-kun's role, and Sacchan was the opposite, the bully type. But you're right, Sacchan was a bit different inside the *Team*, like the one loner. You know, like he was colored differently."

"More than you?"

"Boku-sama-chan was everyone's manager, so it's not right for me to be different or odd."

"....."

Well, nothing to say.

I had recently learned to stay silent.

"Chii-kun was, what was it? A seeker, if I remember correctly."

"Yup. A transcendent, shred seeker who could look for anything as long as it's within the galaxy. I don't know what woulda happened if it weren't for Chii-kun this time, either. It took a while to get his help though, because Chii-kun hated Sacchan."

"Don't know what woulda happened, eh..." but even now, after having received Chii-kun's help, I could not fathom what would happen.

"And so? If Chii-kun was a seeker, then Sacchan... what was Utsurigi for? Did he know the secret to the Big Bang?"

"Nope," Kunagisa quickly rejected. "Ii-chan, I think you've misunderstood, but Chii-kun's *searching* is really on a different plane. I think putting it this way might be crass, but even if I take a hundred years or a thousand years, I might not be able to find something Chii-kun finds in one day. Chii-kun was that outlandish even among the *Team*."

"Hmm... that is certainly unexpected."

Insidentally, that Chii-kun is currently residing in the maximum security prison in the United States for something like a 150 year term. And if I remember correctly, Chii-kun was the same age, nineteen, as Kunagisa and I, so, yes, currently medicine is bountiful and improving, so he may be able to come out while he's still alive.

"That's why, compared to Chii-kun, Sacchan's spec goes down a few levels. Of course, they specialize differently, so it's not something that I can simply compare, but. It's like comparing Hiei Mountain and Kamogawa River."

"That comparison does not allow for comprehension of magnitude... so? What is his specialization?"

"Yup. Sacchan's specialization was *cracking* everything."

"So he's a cracker..."

"Yup," nodded Kunagisa Tomo. "There're lots of explanations for the differences between crackers and hackers, but in Sacchan's case, in *Utsurigi Gaisuke*'s case alone, there's no difference. Sacchan devoted every bit of his specifications into *destroying*. Specifications that might have even been able to comprise the best all-rounder were dumped purely into *destroying*, so he's a specialized, extremely specialized, too specialized, cracker."[1)]

"Just to crack?"

"Just to crack," Kunagisa said, in a rare exception to her carefreeness, with a bit of wistfulness. "As you'd guess from his name, he's someone with a very strong sense of self, Sacchan. He's not someone with a bad attitude like Chii-kun, but like, harassing is the norm for him, or like, he loves bothering other people, or like, something like that."

"So you are trying to say that his personality is not bad."

"He was a man of character. He was the second oldest of the members, after all. Ah, but I guess in this case age doesn't matter. Maybe, not sure."

"How do you write his name?"

"*Tree for hanging rabbits*, I think. And then Gai as in a hundred quintillion, and the Suke with the vehicle radical. Boku-sama-chan didn't call the others by real name, so I don't really remember, though."[2)]

Just his name made me think ill of him.

Well, not that I could say anything.

"However, I do not understand... why is that person with such a strong sense of self in the notorious *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou Research

Laboratory? I do not understand the reason. Did Chii-kun not explain that to you?"

"Mm. Like I said, Chii-kun hated Sacchan. He only told me the place. But, just finding out that Shadou Kyouichirou's research laboratory is in Aichi, when no one even knew if it was in Japan, was pretty helpful. I could have just asked Nao-kun but Nao-kun is Nao-kun and has plenty of Nao-kun business to take care of."

"Helpful... having to go there is pretty heavy on me, though..."

"Really?"

"Well, it is not like I can go happily as if I were to going to Universal Studios Japan."

I leaned into the handle and sighed.

We went from Kyoto to Oosaka to Nara, and should already be in Mie. I wondered if Mie was part of the Kinki region or the Chubu region. If it counted as part of the Chubu region, then it means we were getting closer to our destination, the Aichi prefecture. I looked at the analog wrist watch Hime-chan had given me the other day and noted that more than three hours had already passed since we had departed from Kyoto. If we had used a highway we should already be reaching our destination, but the previous month, and the month before that, I had been wounded here and there around both arms, and as that had finally been supposed to fully heal a few days ago, I wanted to avoid driving on the highway.

This was not a trip that required us to hurry anyways.

Because in this case, it was not time that was important.

"That's right, Inoji."[3)]

Then.

From the rear seat that had been silent this whole time came a voice. I turned my head just a little and said, "Were you awake, Suzunashi-san." And in a slightly unhappy way,

"I woke up because Inoji and Ao-chan were yipping and yapping. Even Sleeping Beauty would wake up to that noise. Driving should be done silently."[4)]

Suzunashi-san said.

"To begin with, the rear seats on Fiats are really narrow... they aren't suited for sleeping. I don't get Asano's tastes. She prefers Japanese style things, but her car's foreign, and it's this narrow, inconvenient car to boot.

And it doesn't have horsepower. Does it even have an engine? Asano's thinking process is a mystery. Inoji, don't you agree?"

"No comment, to that."

I figured, Suzunashi-san gave a suppressed chuckle.

"And, Suzunashi-san, what were you saying "*That's right*" to?"

"Hmm," she nodded. "To Ao-chan, Professor Kyouichirou, and that Utsurigi-san are both old acquaintances, and are people she can speak to without any worry as similar *specialists*. Even you, Inoji, you've come through ER3 or HMO or whatnot, you studied abroad at those fancy research systems for five years, so you've steeped yourself in them, right? But this is the first time I'll see a professor or a researcher or that type of person. I don't know how heavy this is to you, but it's even heavier for me."

"That's, unexpected coming from you, Suzunashi-san."

"You know, despite how I look, I'm the type to have anxiety over strangers. How to speak to people like research professors who've studied all their lives, I can't even imagine. I don't even know how to get the volume of a cone."

"Hmm. I see... by the way, Suzunashi-san, do you like *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*?"

"I don't dislike it."

"Then it will be alright. You will do just fine."

"..... is that how it is? Even so, really... Inoji. I'd rather this be the last time. I accepted because Asano asked, but I'm not that bored. Really, I can't win against crying kids, estate stewards, and Asano Miiko."

"I appreciate it."

"Appreciation can be done by anyone. Something that can be done by anyone is boring. Do something that only you can do, Inoji."

She said, and Suzunashi-san lay down on her side on the narrow rear seats. Suzunashi-san is pretty tall for a female – or rather, even for men 180 cm is pretty big – so she seemed wanting for space. And she wore a pure black suit, which was rather formal and showed no pinch of seasonal awareness, along with a perfectly fitting cutter shirt and even a necktie, so it seemed even harder to sleep.

Suzunashi Neon.

My neighbor at the apartment I live in, and friend of the owner of this Fiat 500 Asano Miiko-san, of twenty-five years of age. Normally she worked at the Enryaku temple at the Hiei Mountains , and sometimes came down from there. Through Miiko-san I had met her several times, but this was the first time Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san had met.

"And, Inoji. How long until we arrive?"

"I do not know... is Mie part of the Chubu region?"

"Kinki."

Is that so. Then, I think it will take a bit."

"Inoji. Chubu or Kinki doesn't matter when it comes to Mie and Aichi being next to each other. It doesn't change the time."

"Ah, that is right. I had forgotten."

"Normally you don't forget things like that. Ii-chan, don't tell me you can only name half the prefectures?"

"That is going too far. Who cannot name all the prefectures?"

"I can't. I thought Hiei Mountains was in Kyoto until the other day."

"That mistake is a bit impossible..."

"I had no idea that Kyoto had an ocean, too."

"Please do not sound so proud about that..."

"Hah. I suck at math but I suck at social studies, too. I graduated elementary school without realizing that Australia and Austria are different. I can't tell the difference between Mongol and China. But that doesn't matter. It doesn't bother me one bit in life."

"Is that so."

"That's right. There're only a few things that a person needs to know to live as a person. Though recently there're more and more people who don't even know those things."

She said sarcastically, and lowered the brim of her hat over her eyes.

That outfit to go with her crow-colored hair, a stylish form with her long legs, and with that hat, I could only think of Jigen Daisuke, but Jigen Daisuke's seat was always the assistant driver's seat, which was currently occupied by a nonchalant blue-haired girl, so that ruined it. Well, the driver being me was nothing close to Lupin III's standards.

"But really, I apologize for making you do this. If Miiko-san had nothing to do it would have been perfect–"

“Inoji,” Suzunashi-san said, her hat still covering her eyes. “I understand that this circumstance called for it, but I would personally rather you avoid making Asano a character in these sorts of stories. She’s always been too good to people, always poking her nose into other peoples’ stuff. Actually you could say she was one of those thanks-but-don’t-do-this-again types, where she’d go around forcing her way into issues. And, if she were incompetent that’d be alright, but Asano’s tends to be useful. I don’t like praising friends, but Asano’s top-class with swordsmanship, and she’s actually pretty good with other stuff. And most importantly, she’s not very smart. Or to be blunt, she’s stupid. And not just any stupid, she’s insanely stupid. That’s why she’s the type to get used by people and get the worst of it.”

“Are you praising her?”

“I’m praising her. What else would this be? Anyways, I don’t think that you’re that type of person at all, but I’d still rather you keep trouble away from her. From me, too, of course.”

“I understand.”

“Probably. You understand and still do it, so you’re even worse. Really, I wish you’d just sit still. I won’t say relying on others is bad, but I don’t think it’s good to rely on others to do something that you can do yourself. Doing it alone is always more efficient than doing it together. Too many captains will steer a ship up a mountain, so to speak.”

“I actually think that is amazing. Making a ship go up a mountain is quite astonishing.”

“Stop trying to misdirect this. And if you never reach the goal, then whatever the process was is still worthless. Remember that.”

I had not seen Suzunashi-san in a while, and it seemed she still liked lecturing. However, as the party that had requested the near-impossible, I had the obligation to tag along with a bit of tongue-lashing.

And, Suzunashi-san is not wrong, anyways.

She was just slightly not correct.

“Sorry, Neon-chan,” Kunagisa said. “But this time we desperately needed a chaperone. Boku-sama-chan and Ii-chan are both underage. Boku-sama-chan might be alright with common sense, but you know, Ii-chan...”

“Nothing for Ao-chan to apologize over. You’re a bishoujo after all.”[5)]

“It is alright because she is a bishoujo?”

“Don’t ask the obvious,” said Suzunashi-san with a fearless chuckle. “The value of a bishoujo trumps and tramples the values of everything else. Noble or righteous or pleasant or compassionate or a road or virtue or benevolence or love, all of that riffraff is nothing but dust in front of a bishoujo.”

Her extremely skewed sense of value, her philosophy of *people are categorized as bishoujo, myself, and everyone else* still seemed to be in healthy effect.

Well, they do say people lust for what they do not have, and sticking your neck or mouthing off about the value systems of other people is not a good way to go about doing anything.

“Well, I’ll go catch another wink. I’d been working all-nighters lately so I’m atrociously sleepy. I can’t think of words to describe this atrocity. So, Inoji, please wake me up when we get there.”

“Acknowledged and understood.”

I replied, and for a while after, the road seemed to have become more filled, so I began focusing on driving. Suzunashi-san quickly entered began sleeping (however, it was still incredible that she could sleep in such a place), and I could hear her snoring. Kunagisa was fiddling with her pocket computer. I would not be able to even begin to imagine what this nerd and geek and maniac and otaku blue-hair could be doing, so I did not ask what she was doing.

And then, I thought.

About the place where we were headed, about the man we were to meet.

“Utsurigi Gaisuke...”

2

If you are someone who has dabbled to any extent in the world of electronic engineering, someone who has stepped foot even a little into the territory of mechanical engineering, or perhaps someone who has stuck their neck into underworld of society, then there is no way you would not know of the fame of *Team*. During that era (yes, it had already become its own era) it was impossible to avoid them.

Some called them electronic terrorists and others dubbed them pioneers in virtual space, yet others graded them criminals, and different people worshiped them as saviors. However, not one could be said to be correct, and in turn one could not call them anything and be incorrect, so you could say that it was like describing one facet of truth.

In other words, that sort of *Team* existed. In that world, using the vague pronouns like *them* and *those guys* always referred to that bunch. Of course, while their existence was famous, what sort of group they were, what purpose they were formed for, or even if they were really a group, was publicly unknown. *Team* disintegrated without leaving a single trace. That further turned the existence of *Team* into a legend, a myth.

That was why.

For example, if I were to say that the girl sitting next to me as if she were in paradise was the leader of that group, no one would believe me. And if I were to say that the *Team* that engaged in the enormous damaging activities and the humongous creation activities, that the *Team* that was dubbed the *Brigade of Fanatic Cultists*, was just a small group of nine people, no one would believe me.

One of those nine was the man we were going to meet.

In other words, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

What process Kunagisa had undergone to meet the other eight members, including Utsurigi, and for what motive she began performing her crime-for-pleasure (though they may have been too destructive to just be called that) activities, I do not know. Currently that was outside of the firing

range of my interests, and I also felt it was not something to be asked lightly.

No – honestly.

Honestly, this was not one of those things. That was just an excuse, and a single favorable facet of interpretation. Honestly, probably, with regards to those things, I simply did not want to know. In that blank space that had been formed between Kunagisa and myself, what incidents had happened. I do not want to tell Kunagisa, and what had happened to Kunagisa, I do not want to know.

Kunagisa Tomo.

The one and only friend of mine.

I was still living in Kanbe when I came to know her, and it was a time when I had not yet surpassed the blossoming age of thirteen. Five years ago – no, it was closer to six years, I should say. For half a year, I shared the passing of time with this blue-colored girl, and, after half a year we split ways. We did not keep in touch and five years passed, and we had reunited several months ago.

Five years.

That was enough time for a person to change, but in the end, I did not change much, and Kunagisa as well, was hardly different from before. Aside from the fact that she had created an absurd curriculum vitae in her past, that she had made eight friends in a place I did not know of, and that she had split ways with eight friends in a place I did not know of.

When Kunagisa speaks of them, she seems genuinely happy. When she told me about *Chii-kun* who can grasp anything in the galaxy, also known as Ayanami Hyou, and when she was explaining *Sacchan* also known as Utsurigi Gaisuke this time, she always seems truly happy. As if she were showing off a prized treasure, she always became really happy.

I was not pleased by that.

I did not know why, but it bothered me.

"In other words, just jealousy...."

I felt like that was also a bit wrong, but it also probably was not off enough to bother explaining. I am not saintly enough to accept and forgive everything, and I also do not have an honest-enough personality to convert Kunagisa's happiness to become my own happiness. Truth be told, it was hard for me to say I had pleasant feelings toward those eight, whom

inhabited a place closer to Kunagisa than myself. I would not say enmity, but this feeling was probably not one of fondness.

However.

However, in this case, more than this melancholic feeling.

"It is so heavy..."

"Why?"

I had meant to say that to be unheard, but Kunagisa responded to my talking to myself. Of course, this being Kunagisa, she did not take her eyes off her pocket computer. She was proficient with multitasking, to the point where one could wonder if she had several thousand brains. A long time ago, she was able to perform an inhuman feat of controlling 128 computers at once. When you think about that, then this sort of thing is simple. It was not that she lacked concentration, but rather that she could split her concentration in every which way and then some and still have concentration left over.

In other words, when that concentration focused toward a single truth – it was easy for her to wage war against the world.

"What's heavy, Ii-chan? Or was *heavy* a pun? Hmm, that's funny. Boku-sama-chan thinks that's funny."

"I would not say something like that... just talking to myself. No need to worry about it."

"Then I won't. But you know, Ii-chan, you don't need to worry that much. Sacchan doesn't bother anyone he doesn't actually care for."

"That would be helpful, but the source of my anxiety lies elsewhere..."

"You mean, Professor Kyouichirou's place is making you anxious?"

"To be blunt, well, yes."

I nodded.

Shadou Kyouichirou Research Laboratory. According to Chii-kun's information, Utsurigi Gaisuke was currently *working* as a Fellow there, and it was one of the scarce research laboratories in Japan that had no background pressure and was for purely research. I had heard much about the esteem and prestige of that research organization several times, and remembered. Remembered. For me, with this brain of mine that has such problems remembering things that one might think it was created entirely of resisters, this was nothing short of a miracle, and I could follow by saying that this proved the incredible-ness of the laboratory. And more

than anything, the manager of that laboratory, Shadou Kyouichirou, presided over fame that rivaled that of *Team*.

As *Mad Demon Kyouichirou*.

As you can glean from that alias, he is widely known, but he is also a researcher that is not widely respected. Mathematical biology, form machinery, animal behavior, molecular theory, et cetera et cetera, he traversed multiple specializations, and was someone who pioneered multiple sciences. That sort of background, and his own **qualities** combined and created an eccentric scientist on a class of his own. He is currently sixty-three, yet he still performs research in that laboratory facility, they say.

"You have met Professor Kyouichirou, right?"

"Yup. But that was before I met Ii-chan. Boku-sama-chan was around twelve then, I think."

"Mmm. Twelve."

"The research facility was in Hokkaido then... I went with Nao-kun."

"Huh, is that so."

"Yup. Nao-kun still had free time then."

Nao-kun would be Kunagisa's bigger brother, Kunagisa Nao. He possessed an ordinary personality that would make you doubt that he shared parents with Kunagisa Tomo, and six years ago, I came to be under his care for quite a bit. Nao-san currently works properly as a secretary for his father (which in other words means Kunagisa's father as well, but Kunagisa's been long disowned), so we did not have the opportunity to see him much.

"Professor Kyouichirou was pretty sharp then, but it seems he became even more twisted since then. He got a lot of warnings from higher up, so now he hides his location and continues research with a few elite, so he's pretty abnormal."

"You are calling someone else abnormal?"

"Abnormals know abnormals," Kunagisa said with a bit of pride. "Set a thief to catch a theif, I think? Hmm, but in this case it might be more right to say set a theif to catch a thief."[6)]

"I see..." I nodded absentmindedly. "So would it simply be that he is like a mad scientist?"

"Yup. Like a mad scientist."

“You know... so, what is he researching as he coops up in the mountains? That Professor Kyouichirou.”

“Seven years ago, to be really rough he was working on artificial intelligence. But that’s a really rough way of putting it. Yup, that was the trendy thing back then, artificial intelligence. Boom-ment, I think they’re called? It was one of those things. Of course Professor was working on something a bit different.”

“I have made an artificial intelligence before. As part of my class across the ocean.”

“Boku-sama-chan’s made stuff like that a lot, too. Hii-chan was the best of us at that though. Hii-chan always said, *Talking to a person and singing chords to an artificial intelligence are similar, because they’re similar in that they’re incompetent*.”

“That one also sounds like an asshole...”

“Pretty much. Boku-sama-chan might have been the only good girl. Anyways, when boku-sama-chan met Professor before, he was doing innovation or pioneering into artificial intelligence as a whole, I think. But just as there’re trends in the world, there’re also abandonment in the world, so there’re rumors that he’s not working on research on artificial intelligence as seriously anymore. I don’t know what he’s working on, but he’s probably still somewhere related to something like cybernetics.”

“Hmm...”

“But that aside, he’s probably doing something that can’t get funding. He’s that kinda person. Really, always has been.”

Kunagisa said with a bored tone, and stuck out her lips a bit in a pouting way. This was a rare delivery for Kunagisa Tomo. I said nothing, because it was obvious that Utsurigi was causing her to react this way. I did not intend to say anything, anyways.

I shut up and continued driving.

“But there’s nothing for Ii-chan to worry about. The professor also doesn’t care for people he doesn’t care for. His personality is actually really bad, but Ii-chan just has to come along with boku-sama-chan. As long as you’re with boku-sama-chan, everything’ll be alright.”

“Is that so. That is a thankful thing, really.”

Of course, that was probably the truth. For *Green Green Green* Utsurigi Gaisuke and *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou, an ordinary private

university student like myself meant nothing. Given prior experience, I am quite aware of that fact about myself, so I did not feel much (although not much is what you make of it) anxiety over that. Really, I had not said anything to Kunagisa, and I had no intention of saying anything, but the source of my anxiety came from somewhere else. And that anxiety would most likely materialize within the first day.

"... sigh... I still feel heavy."

And that too, ultimately, would simply be destiny that could only be called coincidence. There is nothing that can be done about it. My life is only worth that much, after all. Flowingly flowing with the flow. I did not have much dissatisfaction with that. Just anxious, that was all.

"Nn. Looks like we're in Aichi. Then, take the next left, Ii-chan."

"Really? That takes us even deeper into the mountain path."

The road had long since turned into a dirt path that had not been maintained at all. If you looked outside the window, you would see nothing but Cryptomeria trees. People with pollen allergies might get goosebumps seeing that. When you are in a place like this, you might even wonder if the Earth is truly lacking trees.

"The laboratory is deep into the mountain. This place isn't on the map, so we hafta rely on memory."

"Hmm... that is fine. Your navigation will not have any errors. But how much more to go? Depending on distance, I may need to refuel soon. This car really does not have horsepower."

"Soon. It should be around the border of Mie and Aichi. But Aichi is really nice. Lots of smart people."

"Is that so?"

"It's so. It's where the Nagoya-uchi was found. It's a region with a blessing. I think that's why Professor ended up settling his laboratory in Aichi. It's probably not just idiocy, and I don't think he had any money issues... Ahh. But I'm looking forward to this. Seeing Sacchan again, it's been so long."

"That is fine, but please think about **after seeing him**. You didn't come to Aichi to just sight-see, right? I don't intend to be much of a help to you this time, either."

"Hmm? Why? Jealousy?" grinned Kunagisa Tomo with a bit of happiness. "Ii-chan always looks uncaring, but you get pretty jealous

easily. You're narrow-minded at crucial moments, or something. You can relax, you know? I mean, boku-sama-chan likes Sacchan and Chii-kun, but I only love Ii-chan."

"That is precious. But this is not about jealousy. It is different from that. Well, I say it is different but I guess if you were to describe it, it would be similar... oh."

I saw a silhouette in front, so I put my focus back in front. A pair of men wearing uniforms that looked like they belonged to security waved sticks that glowed red, and called for us to stop our car. I looked more closely and noticed that there was a big gate behind them that could be described as a steel fence.

This deep in the mountains, security.

"....."

I stepped on the brakes and stopped the car, then slowly opened the window. And then the two security guards approached the Fiat, and with a gruff voice said to us.

"From here on this place is private property, and would constitute trespassing. Please return the way you came."

They spoke polite words, but the way they spoke was extremely abrasive. Well, being forced to stand out here in this damn hot weather would make anyone turn out like that. Complaining about such small things in this circumstance is something only a truly horrible person would do. It is not my role to criticize their lack of professionalism. And, it was honestly hard to tell if their attitude was out of lack of professionalism, anyways.

"No, um, well. We have an appointment with Professor Shadou."

"Professor? Th- then, you're Kunagisa-sama?"

The security guards' attitudes quickly changed. They probably did not think someone with the backing of Kunagisa would be driving such a shoddy car, so it would still be harsh to chide them for that.

"I am not from Kunagisa... but I am with her."

I said, and pointed to Kunagisa sitting next to me with my thumb. Kunagisa Tomo herself remained staring at her pocket computer, and did not look at the security guards. However, her blue hair seemed to be a sufficient symbol, as the security guards nodded, "Understood."

"Then you are Kunagisa-sama's friend... there should be one more, a chaperone..."

“Ahh, then...” I shifted my thumb that was pointing at Kunagisa to the rear seats. ”... Shall I wake her up? I do not mind, but I cannot guarantee anything in that case.”

”..... no, that’s fine.”

The security guard said after a few seconds of silence. Yes, that is the wise choice, I thought. No one needs to step on a landmine with excessive force.

“Then, please write your name on the visitors’ list. It may seem a bother, but it’s part of our procedure.”

“Sure.”

With Kunagisa being that and Suzunashi being that, I would have to be the one. I opened the door, and left the car. The security guard, who had returned to what looked like the guard outpost (it seemed prefab, and made me sweat just looking at it) came back with an A4-size clipboard. And then, “please sign here,” and handed me a ballpoint-pen. I had thought I would be typing into a computer, so I was a bit surprised by the anachronism.

“Yeah. I agree. However, the Professor says *they can’t trick their way through this*. That if you use a computer or something that manages things, then improper access from outside becomes possible, is what he said. Well, I do not understand what he means, but in any case, he says *handwriting on paper* is the safest way of saving information.”

“I will not say I do not understand his point, but he sounds very paranoid...”

I said as I wrote Kunagisa’s name, Suzunashi-san’s name, and then my name. Address... in Suzunashi-san’s case, what should I write here? Would it be fine as Hiei Mountains Enryaku Temple? I cannot just write no specific address so I have to write something, but *Hiei Mountain* and *No Address* are both equally suspicious. After pondering such rude-to-Hiei-Mountain-inhabitants thoughts, I ended up writing that Suzunashi-san lived in the same place that I do. It was too painful to joke about to write such a thing, but I felt it was a lie that would at least be something we could laugh about afterward.

“Have you brought anything dangerous?” the other security guard asked me as I was left in thought. “Blades and powerful medicines cannot be brought in...”

“Blade... I brought a scissors...” I answered. “Is a scissors no good? He sounds really paranoid...”

“No, that should be fine. I apologize, please do not take this the wrong way. The security level has been upgraded since yesterday. We’re required to ask even Kunagisa-sama and her associates these questions.”

“The level was upgraded? Why?”

“Ahh...” the security guard looked conflicted a bit. And then he lowered his voice and continued. “Well... This would be two days ago. But there was alarm over an intruder.”

An intruder, I responded. That did not sound pleasant. I wondered if intruders to a research laboratory like this would mean an industrial spy or something. That seemed like an unrealistic thing to imagine, like from a movie or a book, but this place is unrealistic anyways (after all, it’s a *research laboratory deep in the mountains*, which makes me laugh), so it may be expected. Rather, in this case, I should be relieved that the security level was not raised because *Kunagisa Tomo is coming*.

“Yes. See, it’s the name at the top of the visitor list,” said the security guard who I had given the board back to, and he handed it back to me, and said. “Bastard walked right through this gate, feigning being a visitor from a different lab. To trespass in a way that gets detected so quickly, really disrespecting us, or just really strong-willed, or reckless...”

”... and, that *intruder*, was he caught already?”

“Ah, no... not yet...” the security guard said, a bit awkwardly. “However, please be assured. It seems they have already escaped from within the laboratory, so there should be no bother caused to Kunagisa-sama. And, the police have already been notified, so it should be a matter of time before they are apprehended.”

Is that so, then that is a relief, I nodded. Intruders and spies were a violent word, but if they had already left then it should have no direct bearing on our story. Whether they are arrested by police afterwards or whatever matters not to us. He is not here, and that is sufficient. This is already convoluted, so I would rather avoid a new character.

“If you continue along this route with the mountain, you will reach a pretty large parking space. Please park your car there. There should be a person from the lab coming to greet you there, so just follow their

directions after that. After about five minutes from the parking lot, you will reach the laboratory."

"Understood. Thank you for your careful instructions."

I nodded. And then, without any care, truly without any care, I glanced at the name of the *intruder* written at the top of the clipboard. Of course, an intruder would not write their real name on this clipboard, so it must be a fake name, but I was just slightly curious about what fake name they may have used.

And, my eyes, stopped.

"... this name."

"Huh? Yes. It's a rather laughable name, isn't it? I thought it was suspicious because of it... but there's no point dwelling on it now..." the security guard complained. "... however, that name, how would you read it? *Reishiki Aishiki*, perhaps?"

"No... Zerozaki Itoshiki, I believe."

I said, and returned the clipboard to the security guard, and then said "farewell" and returned to the car. The security guards ran back to the gate, and began opening the gate. I restarted the engine that was set to idling stop.

"Mm? Ii-chan, what happened? You've got a worse mood now. Like 55%."

"No. I got permission to go through without any problems. No problems whatsoever." I responded without any emotion. "There's nothing for you to worry about."

I started the car, and went through the gate. As we went along the road the security guard had instructed us about, "those security guards," the voice from the rear seats sounded again.

"I wonder what they thought when they saw us?"

"... please make it more clear whether you are awake or asleep, Suzunashi-san."

"At the least, I'm awake now. Isn't that enough? Y'know, it's impossible to sleep here. Anyways, what do you think? Inoji. From a third-party perspective, I wonder how we look?"

"Who knows? Certainly not like Lupin III's company." I arbitrarily responded, as I could not figure out what Suzunashi-san was after. "What do you think, Suzunashi-san?"

“Me? For a moment, I thought of the Wizard of Oz.”

“Wizard of Oz?” I tilted my head quizzically at the unexpected response. “What sort of story was that? If I remember correctly, the protagonist was Oz, right?”

“Wrong, Ii-chan. What do you mean *if I remember correctly*, you should fix that habit of yours, making stuff up while making it sound like you know anything about it,” fired back Kunagisa from the side, still staring at her pocket computer. “If the protagonist is Oz, the world would completely change. The protagonist was Dorothy.”

“But Ann is the protagonist of Ann of Green Gables, right? Tom is the protagonist of Tom Sawyer, right?”

“Your point of comparison is so off.”

“Then, what sort of story is it?

“Yup,” Kunagisa nodded. “Dorothy gets caught up in a tornado and gets flung into the Wonderful Kingdom of Oz, and travels with Mr. Scarecrow and Mr. Lion and Mr. Robot.”

“Momotaro?”

“The Wizard of Oz. Let’s listen to people, Ii-chan.”

“I am listening. So those four people... or well, three of them are not people, but anyways those four, go to defeat the Wizard of Oz. I see.”

“Not to defeat... Dorothy just goes to get her wish granted. *Please return me to my home*.”

“Mm. A pretty pacifistic story. Pacifistic, or foolhardy... hard to tell,’ I followed-up, while having a strange feeling about that story. “But even if Dorothy is alright with that, what are the other three for? Did they receive some dango?”

“The scarecrow and others had their own motives, too. Wishes they wanted granted by the wizard. For example, Mr. Lion *wanted courage*. Mr. Scarecrow *wanted brains*. It’s a story of them overcoming hardships for that.”

“Hard to tell if the story is about relying on your own strengths or relying on someone else...” I said and glanced at the rear seat. “So, what are we like that Dorothy group? Or rather, what sort of casting breakdown is it?”

“Dunno... just thought that for a moment, so don’t ask me. But hmm, casting... casting. Well, in any case I’d like the scarecrow. Because I want a

smart brain," Suzunashi-san said, still lying down. I thought it is manners to sit up when speaking, but Suzunashi-san has her own set of logic. "And, Inoji, you're the robot."

"The robot," I looked at Kunagisa. "Tomo, what did Mr. Robot want from the wizard?"

Without any trace of anything, Kunagisa answered "a soul." I looked toward Suzunashi-san again, and found that she was grinning this mischievous smile. I see, you just wanted to say that. There are some roundabout ways of scolding, I sighed, half-exasperated half-helpless.

"Ahh, but that's that, you know," said Kunagisa. "It's a nice story because they think soul and brain are different. Like a fantasy."

"Fantasy?"

"It's fantasy. What other than fantasy would it be? Because the soul is a result of physical action by the brain, right? That's why the field of artificial intelligence is possible."

Kunagisa said, as if stating the obvious and known. Well, that probably was absolutely clear to Kunagisa. I simply agreed, "That is right," as I did not feel in the mood to say anything.

While thinking that she might be like a little girl wanting to return home.

"....."

If that is the case.

If that is the case, then who is the lion without courage, I wondered.

3

I parked the Fiat in the parking lot and pulled out the key. I looked at the remaining fuel symbol and thought it might be a dicey amount. Whether the car would last going down was questionable. At worst, we would have to borrow fuel from someone from the laboratory, but I wondered if they even had any. Looking around the parking lot, I could see no car other than Miiko-san's Fiat. Perhaps there was an employee-specific parking lot, because worst case we would have to walk home, is what I thought, as I left the car.

I looked at the sky, which looked a bit suspicious. It was not that dark clouds were forming, but it still felt like tonight, or perhaps tomorrow, it would rain. It was like it was foreshadowing our future, and it was not comforting.

If you want to predict tomorrow's weather, you just need to say "it'll be something like today." I forget who said that, but I see, it is quite apt. If that is the case, then I will be experiencing this research facility the same way as always. That premonition gave me goosebumps.

"Well then..."

According to the security guard, someone should be picking us up from the parking lot. I glanced around thinking that, and saw a silhouette toward the east. I could not make out their face from this distance, but given that he was wearing a white lab coat, I assumed he was the research fellow that had come to pick us up. Then, he seemed to notice us, as he began walking toward us.

"Hello."

I raised my right hand, but he did not respond. Just silently, he walked toward us.

His height was roughly the same as mine, being neither particularly tall nor particularly short, like average. As the distance closed, I could tell that he was an inordinately young person. No matter how you looked at it, he was younger than me, like in the first half of his tens, at least his face

looked that way. However, despite his youthful face there was a terrible unsuitable, dark look in his eyes beyond his glasses, which betrayed his childish looks. Of course, there exist in this world twenty-seven-year-old maids that look like they are middle school age or younger, so I could not determine age from his appearance.

Without lowering his pace, he continued to close our distance, and finally, *clattered* his feet still, standing right in front of my eyes and nose. In this case, right in front of my eyes and nose was not an exaggeration at all. He had come close enough so that if I leaned my body forward just a bit we would be touching. not only that, he was leaning his babyish face to within millimeters of my face. This was a distance such that if he were not a man, it would completely look like he were kissing me.

I stood maintaining status quo, not knowing what to do, when he seemed to sniff, as if smelling, twice, thrice, and then grumbled, "Hmph."

"So you're Kunagisa Tomo from *Cluster*."

Rather than calling it crass, his speech mannerism sounded like it was expressing disrespect. However, his voice was as young as his appearance, so I felt surprised, but did not feel that disturbed by it.

"No, I am not. I am just a tag-along, or rather, the commentator," I took a step back and created space between us before responding. "I guess an old-fashioned way of saying it would be a chauffeur."

"Ahh? What's that? I didn't hear about this. I didn't hear about such a thing coming along. Then where's Kunagisa Tomo, hey," as if looking for his fated enemy, he furrowed his brow and leaned toward me. "I don't see him, anywhere."

"In the shade of the car. See, there," I said, pointing at the blue-haired girl holding a pocket computer and various belongings, as she came out from the other side of the car. "That cute girl is Kunagisa Tomo."

"Ahh? What's that? Kunagisa Tomo was a girl? You lying?"

He said with a sense of unexpectedness, and then he walked around the Fiat, and this time walked to Kunagisa. Kunagisa tilted her head at this new species of man's appearance, "Uni?" and he stared at her quite a bit, "Hmm," and finally even after having her blue hair slapped, did not show any signs of resisting. What a shockingly reckless fellow. This world has types of people whom have never even been slapped by their parents,

although in that sense Kunagisa was the type who would not notice even if she were punched by her parents.

"Doesn't look very smart. Just a puny brat. Hey, are you really Kunagisa Tomo from *Cluster*?"

"Really. Boku-sama-chan's name is Kunagisa Tomo. Kunagisa Tomo no matter who looks at me. I came to see Sacchan."

"Ahh? Sacchan? Who the hell's that..."

Stupid, stupid, he spat, and he stuck his hands in the pockets of his lab coat, which seemed a bit too big for him, and began walking forward. He did not say to follow, but that was probably what was meant.

"Really, just a brat... a girl, with that title. Ahh, shit, the worst, the absolute worst. The worst filth."

"You look like a brat too though, Oogaki Shito-kun."[7)]

He froze.

He... Shito-kun completely stopped moving his legs. And then he froze in place for three seconds, and then turned around, "Why do you know my name?"

"Hmm? No, despite her looks, Kunagisa is nineteen, so I thought it was odd that you would be calling her a brat. You are correct that she is a girl, but compared to you, Kunagisa is not a brat."

"I'm not asking that, shit! *Despite her looks*? The fuck cares!" He stomped his foot on the ground. "I'm asking why you know my name! And my age! I don't remember telling those to you!"

"It is not as though your name is all we know," I raised both of my hands in a shrug. "About Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, about his secretary Uze Misachi-san, about the fellows Koutari Hinayoshi and Neo Furuara and Kasugai Kasuga, we know quite a bit."

"Ii-chan, you forgot one. Ii-chan you really forget stuff," Kunagisa said from beside me. "There're four researchers other than Professor and Sacchan, so you're missing one."

"Ahh... that is right. That was right. I was being forgetful," I nodded to Kunagisa. "Yes. And Miyoshi Kokoromi-san. I think that would be all the people here, but Shito-kun, do you have any more questions?"

"... What are you? What are you two? How'd you find that stuff out?" he glared at us with suspicion, as if he meant to come biting as us depending

on the way we answered. "**Those things** are supposed to be classified here. People like you shouldn't know. How'd you find that out?"

"Who knows. That is, after all, classified, so I am afraid I cannot tell you. However, I just want you to understand that it bothers me to deride Kunagisa Tomo based on her appearance alone, if–"

If you will please, Oogaki Shito-kun, I meant to finish, but I took a strong blow to the back of my head, so my line was forcibly stopped. I turned around, and saw Suzunashi-san standing there with her hand balled into a fist. And this time, as I had turned around, she flicked my forehead. It struck cleanly, and sort of hurt. Suzunashi-san, when did you step out of the car?

"What're you doing. Jeez, bragging about stuff that wasn't your doing," Suzunashi-san said as if she had just awakened, in an ill mood. "Is that fun? Teasing little kids. You disappoint me."

And then she struck my head lightly again, and then forced down my head. And then she turned to Shito-kun and said, "Our bad."

"He has a bad habit of getting all wound up when it comes to Kunagisa-chan. He's an idiot with bad intentions but please forgive him. He's apologetic, as you can see. And I'll scold him tonight, so please let this go for now."

Punched, flicked, and then I have to get scolded, too?

"..... Ahh... no, no, no," Shito-kun seemed to be taken aback by Suzunashi-san, who was forcing my head down, and did not know what to do. "No, it's, what, nothing to worry about..."

"That's good, all's well that ends well," Suzunashi-san finally let me go. "Then, please guide us to that laboratory or something. My whole body aches all over and it sucks. I'm Suzunashi Neon, the chaperon for these two. Pleased to meet you."

"... I'm Oogaki Shito. An assistant for Shadou Kyouichirou here... pleased to meet you."

He greeted Suzunashi-san in a daze, and then resumed walking. This time, for sure, we followed suit. It seemed we were to climb a mountain by using the woody path north of the parking lot. It did not seem like a difficult trail, but still it was not a flat path, so I carried Kunagisa's belongings for her.

When I lifted the bags with my shoulders I felt pain streak across the back of my head. Hmm, as would be expected of Blackout Suzunashi, she punched me without holding back at all. Perhaps the back of my skull even has a crack. That said, I was without a doubt in the wrong with my attitude earlier, so I could not feel the will to complain.

And, it was as Suzunashi-san said. There was no need to get so heated up over Kunagisa being humiliated to that puny extent. I understood. And Kunagisa herself seemed to care not in the least. Even now, in a rare sight given how she was usually cooped up, Kunagisa was gazing around at the colorful trees lining the path, showing some level of enjoyment, so it did not seem she was bothered in the least. It made no sense for me to be the one to get angered over it.

"I guess I am narrow-minded at critical junctures... I lose."

In any case I decided to contemplate that. I turned to Kunagisa and said, "I was in the wrong." Kunagisa seemed not to know what I was apologizing about, cocking her head to the side, "Uni?" and even then that was just for a moment, as her soul seemed to have been ensnared by the trees. Suzunashi-san seemed to look at us with an expression of *golly gee*, and when I noticed her, she pulled the brim of her hat down to cover her eyes.

"Hey, you."

Suddenly.

Shito-kun called to me, walking roughly two meters ahead of us like a scout.

"Hey you, come here."

"I would prefer you stopped calling me you in such a manner... I am older than you, after all... nineteen."

"Shut up, that doesn't matter. Age doesn't matter **here**. It's not age, but purely who's smarter. And I'm smarter than you, so you should be respectful to me."

"....." Shito-kun's pretty simple, I thought, and I walked up to him. "What is it? Do you have a question?"

"Ahh, a question..." he whispered. "That big black one, is that a guy? Or a girl?"

"....." I glanced back at Suzunashi-san, then back at Shito-kun, and felt compelled to whisper, as I replied. "... Technically, a girl."

“I see. I was right. That’s a relief.” Shito-kun nodded. “Huge. How many centimeters does she have?”

“One-hundred eighty-nine centimeters. But she had not measured herself since she was sixteen, so she may be more now. But once you go past a hundred eighty-nine, height does not really matter anymore. I wish she would share about ten with me.”

”... wow. Jeez.” Shito-kun seemed to genuinely admire her. “Did she used to play volleyball or basketball or something? Or does she have other ethnic blood? I don’t think even foreigners get that tall that often.”

“She says she is a pure Japanese... maybe it is because she has a blood-type of A?”

”... hah. ... jeez, **you can’t mistake that**. Not like that.”

He then looked up at the sky, as if sighing.

Personally, Suzunashi-san has a slender form overall, so I did not think she was particularly masculine in her looks, but well, with that height and with that all-black appearance, and the hat pulled down over her eyes, it may be hard to discern her gender. Suzunashi-san’s speech mannerism was rather feminine, but these days you cannot determine based on speech mannerism. I will not say who, but there do exist in this world women of extreme beauty that blare ridiculously vulgar phrases.

“That.”

Shito-kun pointed ahead.

“The laboratory is beyond that wall.”

“Huh...”

Beyond his finger, past the mountain trees, was a cold concrete wall that destroyed the scenic atmosphere. It seemed completely connected, like a circle, and like a mountain had been created around it. Even from this distance it seemed an abnormally tall wall, and it reminded you not of a first-class academic researcher, but of something else. Yes, if I were to verbalize it.

“Like a prison...”

“Prison? That’s wrong. You’ve got no senses,” Shito-kun said in a proud way. “That’s a fortress. An unconquerable fortress. And that’s like a castle wall.”

“A castle wall, eh...”

Indeed, in this mountain with bad footing, this was terrain that would be difficult to attack. However, did that laboratory truly house something that required defenses to this degree? And, despite what Shito-kun might say, this place still looked like the wall of a prison. Not to reject intruders from outside, but rather to deny escape from within...

"Like a *Barrier of the End*... oh, by the way Shito-kun, I heard from the security guards that yesterday or the day before, there was an intruder to this lab."

"Ahh. I heard something like that. I don't really know. I just saw his back from far away." he seemed to chuckle, with a malicious look. "But really, what an idiot. He ran off in the end without being able to steal anything. Don't take the security here lightly."

"But he intruded?"

"Intruded, I'll acknowledge that," he shrugged with a hmph. "But we don't allow anything beyond that. That's the sort of system this place has. Well, he probably gave up, and won't come back again. People who come in here bare-handed are nuts anyways."

"Bare-handed?"

Bit of an odd way of putting it, but I suppose since the *Intruder* came in through the security gate, they had undergone a body check of sorts, so that was to be expected. So as Shito-kun said, was that just an idiot, or perhaps the reverse and just an incredibly self-confident person, I wondered?

Self-confident, or knowledgeable.

"Ah? What is it?" Shito-kun ran over to me, as I had gone silently, with a suspicious look. "What are you? Why're you interested in that intruder? Are you some friend of that intruder?"

"Of course not. Why would such a convenient setting happen? Where do such cockamamie ideas come from?"

"I'm joking. What're you getting all riled up about, nineteen-year-old."

"My bad, sixteen-year-old."

It was a conversation that did not seem like one between a nineteen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old. Hmph, he went, and Shito-kun went back to silence. Perhaps he was thinking of what *cockamamie* meant. I was not comfortable with that part of English either, so I hoped he would not ask *what does that mean*.

However, Shito-kun seemed particularly venomous about the intruder (I suppose that is to be expected given that he is a victim), but given that the attempt ended in failure, then the intrusion into the laboratory was essentially pointless, I thought. If the intruder had not come in bare-handed, or perhaps–.

I placed a hand over my right chest. To be precise, I placed my hand on the breast pocket of the summer jacket I wore over a T-shirt, which had a thin knife hidden behind it, and I was placing my hand on it to confirm that it was still there.

It was not that I had lied to the security guard back at the gate. There is indeed a scissors in the left pocket of my jacket. Furthermore there is a can-opener in the backpack I am currently hoisting, and canned bear meat that Kunagisa loves so much. Anyways, as such, it was not that I said a lie. Because I do not remember saying that I did not have a knife. Yet however, in this case, I probably would not be able to avoid being labeled a liar.

This was a knife that a week ago, while I was preparing for this trip, an acquaintance contractor of mine had offered me. *An acquaintance contractor of mine* has a very dubious-sounding ring to it, but that is the truth, and so there is no helping it. It came with a holster, and by placing the holster under the jacket, it was designed such that people would not be able to tell that it is there, a simple design. Of course, it would still fail a body check, but I bet that the security guards would not perform such a thing on Kunagisa Tomo and her associates. That may have been a worse gamble than fifty-fifty, but in the end, it worked.

"It may not look it, but that knife has a really good edge, so try not to point it at people," said the contractor – Aikawa-san. "It'll cut like Black Jack's surgical knife – so use it when you're carving a wall or something."

Aikawa-san's worry was extremely helpful, however, this may simply be pouring water on lava. That intruder may be one thing, but for me to have a single knife (and, a scissors and a can-opener?) seemed somewhat pointless. At the very least, this one knife would probably not make it possible to break through that castle wall.

It would be like scratching your back with your jaw.

"Like bittersweet nonsense..."

In this case the term nonsense was not directed toward taking on that castle wall with a single knife. It was toward myself, who despite having

boldly stood up to Kunagisa with the declaration that I *don't intend to be much of a help*, was actually fully intent on helping. Truly, it was as if I had nothing like a core belief. I may become exasperated with myself.

"Hey, Shito-kun."

"Hm? What?"

"Utsurigi... Gaisuke-san, what sort of fellow is he?"

"Utsurigii?" Shito-kun gave an expression of revulsion, as if he were shown the corpse of a cat. "Utsurigi?"

"Yes. Utsurigi Gaisuke-san."

"... A pervert." he spat, as he took two steps and turned his back to me. Or rather, he did not turn his back to me, but rather turned his face away. "A pervert. **he is** through and completely and from head to toe entirely a pervert. How else can you describe that bastard?"

And he stomped off, in an irritated mood. I could not bring myself to pursue the matter, and silently looked him off. If possible, I would have liked to acquire more objective information beforehand about Utsurigi Gaisuke, but hmm, it seemed it would be better to give up. At the very least it was worth learning that Shito-kun did not look fondly upon Utsurigi.

"....."

What I wanted to know was what that Utsurigi Gaisuke thought about Kunagisa Tomo.

The road had become a bit bumpier – or rather, the width of the path had become more narrow, so I stopped, and waited for Kunagisa. And as if I were pulling Kunagisa along by her hand, we continued on the path.

"I see... this is indeed a natural fortress. No, should I call it a castle. And an unmistakably terrible-mannered one, at that. It reminds me of things, though I would rather not."

"We might get lost going back if we don't remember the road. Ii-chan, be careful. Don't wander alone. Ii-chan's hippocampus is just sponge, after all. Uni, if you get lost in this mountain, really, unless you're Jun-chan you wouldn't get out alive. You'll get attacked by wild animals. So don't let go of boku-sama-chan. Ok?"

"I will remember that. I will remember that indeed. However, indeed truly, it seems like a bear or monkey may pop out."

"Inoji. By the way, is it true that monkeys evolved from pigs?"

"What are you talking about? Who told you that lie?"

“Asano. That a pig that escaped from a pig farm and became one with nature became a monkey. Incidentally Asano said she heard that from Inoji.”

“Augh.”

“Ii-chan you liar-. Neon-chan, actually, pigs were evolved from monkeys. It’s the opposite. And actually I wouldn’t call it evolve, but that humans made them monkeys to domesticate them. Like crucian carp and goldfish. That’s why pigs are actually pretty strong. Because they used to be monkeys. Yup, one human versus one pig, the pig would probably win. They say there’re anti-human weaponry pigs these days.”

“Hmm. Manmade... Then can you manually turn a monkey into a human?”

“I don’t think you can...”

“Seems like making a human a monkey is pretty easy, though.”

“And Neon-chan, monkeys and humans are completely different lifeforms. They have similar ancestors, but it’s not like monkeys directly became people. If that were the case, the entire evolution tree would get flipped over.”

“Is that so. Hmm. You learn a lot being with Ao-chan. Really, you learn a lot. By the way, Inoji. It’s not also a lie that penguins are migratory birds that cross between the North Pole and South Pole around September, and that if you look toward the northern sky from Japan you can even see them flying, right?”

“I think there are lies that the fault lies with the deceived.”

“Hey shut up you guys, we’re here.”

Shito-kun said, and we looked in his direction, and found that we were already by the castle wall. The angle was rough so I had not previously seen it before, but when I looked at it from up close, I could sense that it was permeating an uncouth, uncomfortable beyond anything before sort of aura. It probably had not been long since it was built, as it did not seem that dirtied, in fact it seemed brand new, and that was so unnatural that it made me ill. Next to Shito-kun was an obviously steel, insulated door that seemed unnecessarily sturdily built. That seemed to be the way to enter.

Shito-kun opened that insulated door, and in a flourishing way, grinned proudly.

“Welcome, everyone. Welcome to the Mad Demon Shadou Kyouichirou’s Research Laboratory.”

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[1] From now on, I’m going to refer to destroyer as cracker. Nishio Ishin uses the word 破壊 (destroy) but uses the furigana “cracker,” and as is the case with every other instance of this, I’m running with the furigana. In this case these were the first and last times that the word destroy is actually read destroy, so this explanation was to explain why it goes from cracking to destroying back to cracking.

[2] 兎 (rabbit) 吊 (hanging, ie. hanging high school) 木 (tree) 垓 (hundred quintillion)輔(vehicle radical is 車, it’s on the left of the letter). Incidentally some think his name Utsurigi comes from 移り気 (utsuriki), or “intent to transfer.”

[3] いの字 (Inoji), one of his nicknames that he mentioned. Literally means “The letter I”

[4] Ao (Blue). Kunagisa’s hair is blue.

[5] 美少女 (Bishoujo) = Beautiful young girl

[6] This being an idiom, so the “theif” is deliberate, meaning it’s a slightly disguised version.

[7] Incidentally, “brat” is written “gaki,” and his name is oo(big)gaki(brat).

斜道卿壱郎 《堕落三昧》。
SHADO KYOICHIRO

一日目（2）——罰と罰

Day 1 (2)

Punishment and Punishment

0

Tenacity like a cockroach?
You mean they die if you whack them with a rolled-up newspaper?

1

The scientific laboratory of Mad Demon Shadou Kyouichirou – its official name was apparently the lengthy Shadou Kyouichirou Mathematical Theory Learning and Permutation ALS Research Institute – was constituted of a total of eight buildings.

Eight buildings were crowded together in a space surrounded by tall walls that could absolutely not be called spacious, so it would not be possible to deny that it looked cramped from above, but when you entered, it gave the neatly organized impression of a laboratory. It was not that I felt any bit of nostalgia, but the environment made me remember a little.

There were one, two, three - I could see four buildings that looked like dice once we stepped within the walls. Looked like dice, I expressed, but not because of the similarity in shape. Each building had not a single window, and so at first glance it was hard to determine if they were structures that could be called buildings. They resembled avant-garde art more than buildings. Speaking of which, I had heard of stories of industrial facilities that created things like game applications using window-less buildings for security, so perhaps this was the same case? If that were so, then once again I would have to say that they were taking a lot of

precautions. Enough so that I could nod in understanding when they said that the *intruder* was unable to do anything.

Shito-kun continued walking forward, toward the largest building of the four, a building that looked like the General of the dice, then said "wait a moment," pulled a keycard from his laboratory coat pocket, and slid it through the card reader. He also typed a ten-digit code into the numpad placed next to the card reader. I thought the door would open then, but that was not the case.

"Please state your name."

There was apparently a small speaker above the card reader that was difficult to discern, and it sounded like an obviously synthesized voice. It was significantly more high-tech than the anachronistic gate security.

"Oogaki Shito. My ID is ikwe9f2ma444."

"Voice and retina confirmed. Please wait."

And after waiting a moment as directed by the synthesized voice, like an automatic door (if you were to complain that this expression is stating the obvious, then *like magic*), the thick, insulated door opened sideways. Shito-kun said, "hmph," stepped inside, and turned toward us.

"Hurry up and get in. It'll close soon."

I, Kunagisa, and Suzunashi-san entered as told. Inside was a white hallway reminiscent of a newly-built hospital. Shito-kun walked as a guide and spoke.

"This is the Primary Ward, so basically just think of it as the central laboratory ward that also doubles as Professor Kyouichirou's living quarters. I won't explain anymore because it's a pain in the ass. In any case, I'm taking you to greet the Professor, alright? Make sure not to be rude to him."

He was still as abusive as ever, but Shito-kun seemed to at least be responsible toward his own professional duties. He did it roughly, but he still guided us.

"The Professor is waiting on the fourth floor. Here, on the elevator," he said, and he pressed the button to call for the elevator. "Don't wander around like that, it's annoying."

"Well sorry. By the way, Shito-kun."

"What."

"Rather cautious. The entrance security, and the lack of windows."

Ahh, Shito-kun nodded.

"This is normal for a first-rate research facility. I guess I should go ahead and warn you guys not to leave the facility without letting us know. Once you get out yourself you can't get back in."

"Hmm..."

"Well, not that it matters."

We entered the elevator and moved to the fourth floor. I did not know how many floors this building consisted of because there were no windows, but based on my instincts, I thought the fourth floor was the highest floor. We stepped out onto the hall, and Shito-kun pointed toward what looked like a smoke-break room and said, "Wait there."

"I'll go report to the Professor. I'll come back really quick, so don't relax too much."

Said Shito-kun, and then he ran off down the hall. In what world is there a host that directs their guests to "not make yourself at home too much while you rest, please," I thought as I sat down on the sofa in the smoke-break room. Kunagisa sat beside me, and Suzunashi-san sat across. Suzunashi-san took a cigarette out of a hidden pocket on her coat, held it between her lips and lit it with a Zippo.

"... Ahh, I can finally have a smoke," Suzunashi-san exhaled cigarette smoke with an ecstatic look. "Really, Asano... was so persistent about not smoking in the car."

"Of course, because the smell sticks. There is no helping what cannot be helped."

"Well, yeah... I was worried sick about this place being no-smoking, too, but it's all good. But you know, I was expecting something weirder, and of course the place and the walls are pretty weird, but the inside is pretty normal. Like the interior of a university."

"They are fundamentally similar things... However, it is still an extravagant thing, to be using such a large building alone." As someone who lived in an apartment room the size of a mere four and a half tatami, I was truly, honestly envious. "Ah, well... were there three using this building?"

"Yup," Kunagisa nodded. "Shito-kun and Misachi-chan and Professor, so three. The other Research Wards are one per ward, though."

“I see,” I nodded. Really, my memory was as unreliable as ever. “Well, regardless, it is still an extravagant thing.”

“I’m not just talking about the building,” Suzunashi-san spun the cigarette around with her right fingertips as she continued, “The people seem pretty normal too. Normal people, should I say? I feel like I wasted some anxiety.”

“Normal?” I tilted my head to the side. “Normal, Shito-kun? I do not think so... and to begin with, having a sixteen-year-old apprentice itself is abnormal for a normal research institute.”

“I was imagining even stranger things, personally,” Suzunashi-san laughed with a bit of embarrassment. “People that speak in programming language... people that fling mad and dead drugs at you... being naked under the laboratory coat... I was expecting that sort of stuff.”

“You have quite the imagination...”

It seemed Suzunashi-san looked upon academics and researchers and scientists and other people of like ilk through rather colored glasses. Indeed, from such a perspective, Shito-kun would fall under a normal scope. Judging people after having preconceptions is not good, but I suppose in this case an incredibly crass prejudice actually led to an unexpectedly good result. Well, not that we were talking about such an educational thing.

“By the way, Tomo. I want to discuss something serious, now that we have come this far. What do you intend to do? Everything has gone smoothly so far, but you could also say this has simply been the phase where the application is started up, can you not? In any case, nothing caused a hang-up, so how do you intend to move the pieces now?”

“Uni. Unini. Uh, I’ve thought of some varieties,” and Kunagisa leaned back and gazed at the ceiling. “Let’s see. First I’ll see the Professor, and have a chat. Put the problems on hold for now, and get permission to have a proper meeting.”

“He is in the seventh ward, if I remember correctly?”

“Yup. And not to sound optimistic or anything, but I think we’ll get permission to meet. And boku-sama-chan has a few wild cards ready.”

“Wild card...”

I repeated her words, and then thought of a certain contractor, who had popped into my head from those words. The red contractor, mankind’s

strongest. She is a clump of self-confidence, who also certainly has even more than just her confidence, and you could express her as transcendent and superior: indeed, a wild card. She loves disguises and she loves manga, and she loves mischief even more, so that made her quite a bothersome personality to deal with, but there is no more dependable an ally.

"Tomo. Would it not have been easier to get Aikawa-san to help?"

"Hmm. But you need to take care of your own things yourself. It's not good to bother other people with things involving your friends."

"I think that is her job, though..."

As we were talking, as he had said, Shito-kun came back soon. "The professor will meet with you," he said, and hurried us up. That forced Suzunashi-san to press her half-finished cigarette into the tray, and she looked a bit wistful as she did so. Miiko-san had told me to "try to keep Suzunashi from getting too much nicotine," so I did not ask Shito-kun to "wait until Suzunashi-san finished smoking." Not that I think Shito-kun would have listened, anyways.

"This way. Hurry up."

Shito-kun said, and then he walked down the wide corridor, stopping before the door of the furthest room. He placed his hand on the doorknob, turned his head, and repeated, "Don't be rude."

"Especially you," he directed at me. "It's just my personal opinion, but you're weird. Don't say a word."

"You do not hold back from difficult subjects. I know... I do not intend to interfere. I understand my role."

I shrugged my shoulders as I responded, and looked at Kunagisa. Kunagisa did not show any signs of nervousness or anything. She had the same, usual, carefree expression. I would not say that she seemed to be enjoying it, but, it did not seem she cared about meeting the *Mad Demon*. Well of course, Kunagisa was actually wanting to meet none other than the one in the seventh research ward, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

I sighed.

"Right your posture. Well, then..." said Shito-kun. "Excuse us, professor."

And then the door opened.

We entered the room, Shito-kun leading. From the way the hall looked, I expected an interior like a hospital room, but it was nothing like, as it was

like an ordinary visitor room with a round table in the middle. And on the other side of the table, he – Shadou Kyouichirou – sat.

They said he was sixty-three years of age, so I expected a more aged person, but my expectation was almost eerily off. While he did not have completely white hair, he had plenty of it, and showed no signs of balding. While his hair could not be called smooth, it still felt filled with vitality. I thought that his appearance was such that he could pass even if he were to say that he was in his fifties, no, even his forties. And more importantly, that gaze of his, that expression, was nothing like that of an old man. Not quite a researcher either, but rather a veteran, expert politician came to mind. Cunning, expert – such words popped up one after another.

Shadou Kyouichirou.

The room was filled with a presence dense enough to overwhelm and pressure.

"Fufu."

The old man laughed.

"It's been a while – seven years, I think? It's been seven years, I think, lady of Kunagisa."

A hoarse voice. However, that did not mean it lacked force. It was a settled voice, as if a superior person were calling out to an inferior person. If I am allowed to describe it in any way, I would say it was a voice that belonged to someone who stood atop others.

"You changed your hairstyle. That looks more like a child and suits you, lady of Kunagisa. You look more like a child than you did seven years ago."

"Why, thank you," replied Kunagisa to Shadou Kyouichirou's voice. "Thank you for praising me. I am quite pleased to have been welcomed so warmly, professor."

"Hah. You sound so sarcastic."

"Did I? I did not particularly mean to," Kunagisa shrugged. "But, if that is how it sounded, then I must have, after all."

One small lady stood behind the professor. She had a bob cut to her neck, and looked at us with a business-like gaze through her glasses – or if I were to describe it more, a cold, calculating look – and wore a suit. Considering that she did not wear a lab coat, she was probably not a researcher.

In that case, she must be Uze Misachi-san, the professor's secretary.

Shito-kun left our side and walked next to Misachi-san. He whispered something to Misachi-san, then did the same toward the professor. The professor nodded twice, thrice at Shito-kun's words, and then looked at us once again.

"Well then – kukuku, it has been seven years, after all," the professor turned to Kunagisa. "Of course, seven years is not particularly significant to me, but for the lady of Kunagisa, it's quite a few years, given that you're not yet twenty. There must be much for us to talk about, but unfortunately I do not have much time. I am busy, after all."

"Much to talk about? I do not think there is much to talk about with the professor. And we are both busy. You are busy of course, but I have work that I need to do, too."

"Is that so, is that so. That is a difference in perspective, lady of Kunagisa. In my world, we don't call things without industrial value work, but I suppose they do say that play is work for children."

"If play is work, then that goes for both of us. Having no industrial value goes for both of us. I suppose the professor is still playing with machine theory? If so, then thank you for your hard work. There is plenty of surplus and excess, after all. I wonder if you are not having too much trouble with the details?"

"You wouldn't know, lady of Kunagisa. You don't understand anything about me."

"Probably. I think so, too. The professor is right about that. I certainly do not understand.

Kunagisa nodded twice. There was nothing odd about that, per se, but that was why it left me with an odd feeling. I felt like this conversation was not quite right for the Kunagisa I know. Kunagisa would not participate in a **conversation that was not odd**.

"Artificial intelligence – or rather, artificial life, did you abandon that possibility? I heard that through the grapevine, professor."

"I didn't abandon it. I don't abandon anything. I just realized that it was **easier** than I thought, so I'm taking a detour to solidify everything around it. I only want to make things with industrial value, after all," the professor said with a self-effacing sneer. It was truly an expression that did not look like it came from any smidgen of comfort. "I don't do anything as play. I'm not an artist doing things for performance. You shouldn't harangue a

scientist about the work they've poured their life and soul into, lady of Kunagisa."

"Of course, I intend no such thing. Haranguing the professor about what he does? That would be pointless to the point of despair."

Kunagisa shrugged her shoulders again.

That attitude, too, felt a bit off relative to the Kunagisa I know. I do not think I would be able to answer why it was different, however, an inexplicable sense of anxiety began bubbling forth from my heart. I understood that this was neither the time nor the place to fret about this though, so I shook my head and tossed such thoughts aside. I should think of someone like Hikari-san in these situations. Hikari-san was so cute. I wondered what she was doing, now.

"By the way, lady of Kunagisa," Shadou Kyouichirou changed the subject. "Is your father doing well?"

"– Who knows?" Kunagisa seemed to hesitate a bit about responding. "You are malicious, professor. That question is malicious. You know, of course, that I have been disowned since **then**. You have been notified about it."

"Oh, that's right. I'm sorry, I have gotten old, after all. I tend to forget things," laughed the professor heartily. "They say you don't want to age, and they were right!"

"Hmm, I see. Then I assume research must be difficult to do."

"No worries. I don't need to be fret over by a child. Only my memory has waned. There're plenty of media available to memorize things in my stead. As long as I can think, I'll be able to satisfy your father, lady of Kunagisa."

It was a very sarcastic way of speaking. It was a very distasteful way of speaking. I determined from the way he spoke that the professor definitely was not welcoming of Kunagisa as a guest. And on the other hand, Kunagisa also answered similarly, so not a single person would ever listen to this conversation and expect a friendly atmosphere.

Indeed. To Shadou Kyouichirou *Kunagisa Tomo* is a relatively insignificant existence. Even now, while he was acting like he was welcoming a guest, it was just for show. Just as Kunagisa valued Utsurigi Gaisuke, not Shadou Kyouichirou, Shadou Kyouichirou valued Kunagisa's father – or rather, in this case, Kunagisa's house, and not Kunagisa individually.

Kunagisa's house – the Kunagisa Syndicate does not need explanation. One of the few plutocratic households in Japan – no, it would be more correct to call it the ultimate role model of a plutocratic household. When considering relevant matters and affiliated jurisdictions, they encompassed over 22,200, no, realistically surpassing that number, companies. As long as you live a relatively normal life, they are so enormous that you would never realize you lived under their shadow, such was their size, and they had influence over the rest of the world. It was a bloodline that almost felt like that of a phantom.

And **that** also happened to be a patron of this laboratory.

For example, if you were to imagine something like the House of Medici it would fit this case perfectly, but in other words the Kunagisa household does not hold back in providing funding for this sort of personal research laboratory and similar artistic endeavors, for people with specialized skill sets – or rather, they are very aggressive in providing funding for such activity. Why Shadou Kyouichirou despite being labeled *Mad Demon* could without a doubt, even if it is deep in a mountain, have a very proper, unabashed laboratory, and continue research activities like this was because he had the backing of the Kunagisa household. Of course, the Kunagisa household was not providing this funding out of insanity or respect, nor out of kindness of heart, but rather because they wanted rights over the results and information produced by this laboratory, buying everything in advance, essentially to receive royalties and other such gains. Then it may be more accurate to call them not patrons but rather investors. Of course, it would be hard to find investors willing to invest in the *Mad Demon*, so in that sense the Kunagisa household could be called high rollers. However, that was the reason.

That was the reason that *Kunagisa Tomo and her acquaintances* were able to step foot within these facilities. Even if she were disowned, she was still a direct daughter of the primary bloodline within the Kunagisa house, so she could not be treated wrong. It was impossible for Shadou Kyouichirou to turn down her request.

That was why you could say that this situation was formed by Kunagisa using authority as a shield to force her way in. If you think about it that way, the professor's malicious attitude, and Shito-kun's displeased

attitude, all were understandable. We were the ones demanding the impossible.

”.....”

Of course, that was if we were only to talk about the current situation.

“By the way, who’s that boy?”

The professor suddenly changed his focus to me. He clearly thought me as suspicious and even pointed a finger at me.

“I thought the lady of Kunagisa would show up with her brother. I had always thought the lady of Kunagisa’s agent would never be anyone other than her brother. That someone else in this world would be that insane absolutely shatters my world. Hmm? I don’t recognize you. What famous person’s kid are you? Or were you an engineer from the lady’s school? Or perhaps you were someone from *Cluster*, even though you don’t look the type?”

“No. Ii-chan is a friend,” Kunagisa-said nonchalantly. “Nao-kun’s the third-most busy body in the world, so he said he didn’t have the time to come here. But, he said to give the professor his regards. *My sister may do something careless, but I will take full responsibility for everything so please rest easy*, he said.”

“That’s, well... Hahahah,” the professor, for the first time, seemed to simply find that funny as he roared with laughter. “It seems he, too, is quite healthy. Kunagisa Nao, despite his circumstances, is still like that... Hmmhmm. I haven’t felt this amused in a long time. Truly, a long time, lady of Kunagisa.”

The old man seemed as pleased as a child, and then he changed his attitude and said, “Alright.”

“Then let’s have a serious chat. We’re both probably at our limits. So–”

And then the professor looked at me again. I inwardly recoiled at his heavy gaze, but I did not show that in my expression. I probably succeeded, I think. However, my little success seemed not to matter any to the professor, as he continued speaking.

“Can we have your **friends** leave their seats? This is important, after all.”

”... Are you talking about me?”

“Did you not take it that way? Young one,” kuku, the old man chuckled. “You have good eyes, young one. Really good eyes. About equal with our Shito-kun. Such good eyes.”

Upon hearing those words, Shito-kun, who was standing by Misachi-san's side behind the professor, momentarily flashed a displeased expression. He seemed to glare at me, but it was but a moment, as he quickly recomposed himself, and looked away from me.

"However, this is a specialized topic. I don't think I'm asking anything wrong. So, will you leave your seat?"

"Well... but."

"Just listen to the professor, Inoji."

Suzunashi-san placed a hand on my shoulder from behind. I turned and looked at her, and found that Suzunashi-san was not looking at me, but rather directing her sharp gaze at the professor. She was grinning, as if she were enjoying the situation, but in this case this person's smile was a creation, and I knew that she instead used it as a poker face instead. When she was actually enjoying something, Suzunashi-san did not smile.

"Inoji's underaged, and Inoji's an outsider, and then on top of that not an expert, – so you shouldn't be sticking your neck into the difficult conversations of adults. Isn't that right? Doctor."

"... Indeed, that's the case, but," the professor looked at Suzunashi-san with caution. "Who're you?"

"My name is Suzunashi Neon. The repetition of a sound without a bell.[1)] I'm their guardian."

As she said that, Suzunashi-san pushed against Kunagisa's back, half-forcing her back in her seat, and then sat down next to her. No, it was not a style of sitting that could be expressed as *sitting down*. It was a very extravagant way of sitting, as if she were stepping on the chair with her waist, or as if she were expressing conquest and dominance over the chair.

She directed an audacious expression at the professor.

"Of course, since I am their guardian, I'll be sitting in on the conversation. But that's alright, isn't it? Doctor." She raised the ends of her lips, and formed an even more vicious look. "There're no problems. No problems at all, that would cause you to tremble in fear. No, no, actually there's nothing but good. After all, Kunagisa-chan is underaged, like Inoji. We can't have underaged kids negotiating with someone as glorious as the professor without a guardian. If you're a professor with academic prowess, a professor with esteem, and more than anything, a professor who's a

friend of Kunagisa Tomo, then you must have thought about this, of course, so I can't imagine not being granted permission to sit here."

"....."

Violence Neon was never one to be counted out. None could stand up to her skill at playing the villain. Her physical stature also helped her become peerless in acting the villain. I could never pull something off like this, given how I lack an imposing physique.

The professor... laughed, pleasantly.

"Hahahah... indeed, that's true, Suzunashi-san," and he nodded several times as he spoke. "Indeed, you're right. You're correct... correct. Yes, I don't mind, you can sit in. You can sit in as much as you want. But we'll need that young one over there to kill time somewhere for about an hour somewhere."

"Yes. Sound good?" Suzunashi-san turned to me and winked. "That's alright, isn't it? Inoji."

"I will do that, then. Not that I have any choice," I raised my hands in acquiescence, and then said to Kunagisa. "Tomo. I'll be in the smoking room, then."

"Yup," Kunagisa turned to me and smile her innocent smile. "Understood, Ii-chan. I'll be there soon, so don't get lost."

Those words, that smile, all calmed me down.

Yup, that is the Kunagisa Tomo I know.

"Alright, then Shito-kun, let us wait outside."

"Alright, got it. I'll guide you around the area... wait, what!?" Shito-kun shouted. "Don't nonchalantly invite me like I'm a friend!"

I was joking, I said, and I left the rest to Suzunashi-san and stepped out of the visitor's room.

2

It is time for philosophy.

Well now, what sort of thing is a human soul in the first place? For example, someone, I think Freud, had separated the soul as the conscious and subconscious, but was there actually a need to separate them at all? Would I have any troubles if I were to have no subconscious aspect of the soul, or perhaps no conscious aspect of the soul, causing me to become an entity consisting entirely of my subconscious thoughts?

Kunagisa said the soul is a result of the physical activity of the brain. That is probably correct. I am not underestimating contemporary biological science to be able to completely refute that. However, if the concept of a soul is simply the brain acting as a monolith, if it is nothing but the electrical signals of neurons and synapses, then I can understand why some would argue that we are then no different from machines. Or rather, I feel like I fit in better with their perspective. However, even in that case, I would still find myself in more-or-less the same situation: *would I have any troubles if I were to realize that I am the same as a machine?*.

If you could explain everything about human action and human life using complete logic and organized programs, or alternatively if you could create a similar imitation to that, what is actually wrong with that? Just where is the reasoning for the application of the word *evil*? It is not necessitated that a chess player be human. No one would be bothered if the Tower of Hanoi had been routine construction performed by machines. Expressing a cluster of organic matter as a collection of inorganic matter is something to be praised and not something to be condemned. There are those that may say that it is a blasphemy toward God and a rebellion, but there is no reason behind declaring that the action of creating life is a unique privilege of God. After all, modifying a boar to become a pig, and creating replica or imitation life: how much of a difference is there?

If you want to look at things from a logical perspective, then the invention of the automobile would have been a similar affront.

Anyways, these days it has already become generally accepted that theoretically you can reconstruct a human soul using programs and applications. No, you could say that it has already mostly been done. Manmade life that you can hardly tell apart from just its appearance, or what has been called an android from previous times, are supposedly already mere seconds from being practical, or something. Nowadays there is very little that cannot be done through science, costs aside.

That is just how it is, I think.

For example, within my own brain thinking such frivolous things, you could say is just a pool of zeros and ones. As long as you have time, it is possible to express this in text using programming languages and machine language. What I want to say here is not whether that is good or bad, whether it is useless or boring, or anything of the sort.

What I want to say here is that, even though it is something that ultimately can be projected in text form, I could not explain why I was still indecisive like this. If it is text, then it should be simple. If you were to look from a distant place, like a God looking down from their castle in the sky, then my thoughts are nothing but obvious nonsense. That is absolutely not an imagination wrought with romanticism, and absolutely not a fantastic illusion, but rather just a time-worn truth. Even then, that I am doing inexplicable, and meaningless, aimless, contradictory things all the time, could that be called a mistake by God when constructing humans, or simply a kludge program? Could it be that there was a failure from the start, that a block of code that was a mistake had been engraved into my brain?

If that were the case.

What is the point of copying such a program? What sort of meaning is there to my brain, which mass-produces that unseemly text? What exactly is expected by using, as the base, a device that in the end does not evolve or learn even a bit, by creating an application that is constantly misunderstanding, constantly mistaking, for two thousand, four thousand, six thousand years?

Even if such a thing were actually created, would it be the same as looking at yourself through a mirror? Would it not be a futile effort such as looking into the other side of the surface of the mirror, peeking into the

other side of the surface of water? Not to conclude with finality, truly, it is – it is.

"Umm. It is... what?"

I thought about it for a while, but I could not come up with continuing words. I thought for another minute after that, but that did not go well, either. This may be the limit of today's user of nonsense. Jeez, and I abandoned the thought, leaned back against the sofa, and stared at the ceiling.

"Hmmm..... it is tough forcing yourself to think about something that seems serious."

Since I had gone through the effort of coming to a research laboratory like this, I thought of pondering something of the sort (artificial intelligence or artificial life, or something), but you really should not do things that you are not used to doing. At this rate, it did not seem I would be able to arrive at a sensible conclusion. Indeed, pondering should be done after you come to the conclusion first, I learned. The inductive method is not that easy.

The smoking room.

It had already been thirty minutes since I had been kicked out of the visitor's room. Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa, and of course Professor Kyouichirou and Shito-kun and Misachi-san, showed no signs of coming out of the room. At this rate, it seemed more time would be needed.

"An outsider, eh..."

I mumbled.

Well, that is how it is. I did not particularly think anything of it. Especially because I, myself, had no inclination of stepping in. I am used to being left out, and rationally, leaving Kunagisa to Suzunashi-san was the safest course of action. At the very least, it was clear that it is a better plan than having someone dangerous like me near her.

I understand.

I understand that.

I looked at the ash tray on the table in front of the sofa. A single cigarette, the one that Suzunashi-san had crushed on it, remained. It seemed like one with a heavy dose of tar. I knew of no other female who smoked something like this. Well, Suzunashi-san seemed the type to have strong

lungs, and it was nothing that I should be fretting over. At the very least, that person was not one to die of lung cancer.

"... Come to think of it, Suzunashi-san was one of those people who cannot drink alcohol..."

I thought that being able to smoke but being unable to drink is rare, but upon further thought, those things have nothing to do with each other. One is the liver, and one is the lung - completely different internal organs. They are not issues to be lined up together. However, Suzunashi-san's friend, Miiko-san, was perfectly capable of drinking, but absolutely detested cigarette smoke, so I felt like there was some sort of relation, some sort of karma between the two extremes. Although, this sort of logic was warped to begin with.

"I am bored... maybe I will do a robot dance while imitating Miyamoto Musashi..."

Just as I had declared something that made no sense even to me, I suddenly heard the sound of what seemed like a running motor. That was slowly coming closer, and the sound was gradually becoming louder. It was like the sound of the Mini 4WD or remote-controlled cars that I had played with a long time ago, such was the cheap feel to the running motor, but, this sound, I wondered–

As I stood up from the sofa to look for the source of the sound, the source of the sound crashed into my right leg. It was a clump of steel roughly a quarter of my height. Or more specifically, it was like a cylindrical pillar made of steel, with wheels at its feet, along with something like a mob. It relentlessly crashed into my right foot, as I was still half-standing half-sitting.

"–?"

What is this?

Nothing that could describe this bizarre thing resided in my knowledge cabinet. **Ween ween**, it went, like a sound effect in a comic, and I could tell that it was some sort of machine, but I could not determine its purpose.

In any case, I tried holding it down. And then, the mysterious object froze. When I decided to turn it around to the other direction, and then let go, that object, sounded its rumbling noise and ran off that way.

".....? ..... What is that.....?"

"A cleaning robot."

When I saw off the Mysterious Object X with an odd feeling, this time from the other side came a human voice. I turned around, and about five meters down the hall, stood two people wearing the same type of lab coat as the professor and Shito-kun.

One had inordinately long hair, to around their waist. And it was not cleanly long, but rather like a monster that shows up in some book, crumpled and long, as if it had never been treated, had never been straightened. I could not tell their expression through the terrifyingly long hair, but I could see a thick mustache near the mouth that could barely be seen in between the hair, and so I noted that it was a man.

The other had radically different, cleanly-kept hair. However, only the hair was cleanly kept, as the figure was quite unruly. The lab coat looked constraining, and it was hard to say that they boasted a tight, healthy body. That said I could not say that it was an ugly form or anything, but rather, how should I say it, as if they were trying to keep an odd sort of tidiness, like a noble that appears in a foreign monochrome film.

It was not like Miiko-san and Suzunashi-san, but these two were also an extremely opposite pair, I thought, and as I walked toward them, I asked, "What is it?"

"Umm. Did you say something?"

"No no no, not really," the filled one said with an exaggerated wave of the hand. "You were looking at it with fascination. I just thought I'd be kind and tell you what it is. It's a cleaning robot. In other words, a maid robot for menial labor, hahah. No no, we shouldn't laugh, right? Oogaki-kun made it as play, after all."

Shito-kun made it, did he? That is pretty impressive, I thought, and I looked back down the hall, but that Mysterious Object X had already disappeared. It seemed it had already turned the corner.

"It's supposed to use radar and detection to pick up on the location of trash and dirt, and then automatically head that way... you know, our laboratory is pretty dry on funds, because someone spends money lavishly," and then the filled one glanced at the long-haired one with a bit of a sarcastic look. "We don't have enough leftovers to hire a cleaner, so Oogaki-kun took it on himself to make that, yup, well it's actually pretty useful, but... yup, an admirable boy really, considering the times. It's just.

That robot, it's a pain because it can't tell the difference between people and trash."

"That is no good."

So that was why it was running into me earlier. I am the same level as trash.

"There's no need to differentiate between people and trash," a low, quiet, and dark voice came from the long-haired person. "There's no need to differentiate, because they're similar."

If that had been said with the sarcasm of the filled one, I would have been able to respond, but given that it was said with an ordinary rhythm, there existed no way for me to respond. An agreement, like "yes, that is true," would imply that I am acknowledging that I am no different than trash.

"Hah hahahah, this guy says some nasty things sometimes but don't pay it any mind," the filled one said with mirth, and then as if to nudge the long-haired one, continued. "Look, the boyfriend's quite surprised. We're in trouble if you displease him too much, you know?"

And then the filled one looked at me.

"After all, this one's the lover of the niece of the famous Kunagisa household. The lover, hey? Love love, hey? They've got enough power to fling us worthless laboratory fellows with the flick of their finger, hey."

"..... Umm."

"My, apologies and excuse me. I hadn't introduced myself yet," the filled one grinned and exaggeratedly placed an arm over his chest as he bowed. "I am employed here as a fellow, and regardless of my will have been left with the care of the fifth ward, Neo Furuara."

"..... I see."

I vaguely nodded. I nodded, and thought, that if this person, this filled person is Neo-san, then the long-haired person. The long-haired person seemed to have noticed my look (I could not see his eyes through his hair, but it seemed he could see mine) and said,

"Koutari Hinayoshi."

Frankly.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lover."

"Huh....." I answered once more with a vague nod.

Koutari was a name that was ordinary in Kyoto, but otherwise it was nationally known as the type of name that was *so rare that it was famous*.

Perhaps Koutari-san came from Kyoto."

"Hello, well, pleased to meet you."

It was a pair of such extremes, and it was a pair with such different levels of bizarre impact, that I could not determine how excited I should make myself feel. I would need a high level of tension to keep up with Neo-san, but then it would be difficult to go along with Koutari-san. I felt sandwiched between high and low tension, but I began to feel it was pointless to worry over such a thing. There was no need to force myself to deal with these people. I said just "farewell," and then returned to the smoking room.

"Hey hey hey hey hey, don't be like that, don't be like that please, you make me lonely," said the filled one... I mean (come to think of it, that is a rude way of calling him) Neo-san followed, and then without consulting, sat down on the sofa across from me. "Bored, aren't you? Then let's have a chat, Mr. Famous."

"..... I am not particularly bored."

"Someone mumbling about weird stuff like brains and artificial intelligence and souls cannot not be bored," said Koutari-san quietly, as he sat down next to Neo-san. "Furthermore, I cannot imagine someone who thought about doing a robot dance while imitating Miyamoto Musashi is not bored."

"....."

Hmm. They had heard my painful monologue. It appeared they had been observing me for quite some time. It is a bad habit of mine to not notice my surroundings when I go deep in thought. Furthermore this is enemy territory (– it probably was alright to express this place as such), so letting down my guard is unacceptable. The only existence that could possibly let down their guard in such a place would be the red contractor. I decided to repent a bit.

Regardless, they came with none other than *Famous*. I had expected it to some extent, but just as we had borrowed *Chii-kun*'s powers to look them up, they had also investigated us. That would mean that Professor Kyouichirou acting like he had no idea who Suzunashi-san and I were and that he was expecting Nao-kun was just an act, after all.

If that were the case, then was Shito-kun not knowing about Suzunashi-san a means of reinforcing that disguise? Deceive your allies to deceive

your enemies, they say, but hmm, I see, as should be expected of the *Mad Demon*, he is quite a veteran. I glanced at the visitor's room with a tiny bit of admiration. Deceiving your allies – is surprisingly difficult, you know.

"– So? Did the two of you have something to discuss?"

"Well. That puts us in a bit of a pickle, to ask that so directly, right? Koutari-san."

"....."

Koutari-san responded to Neo-san with complete silence.

"My my. This one's cold, too. I feel lonely lonely," however Neo-san showed no signs of being anything of the sort. His lips were curled in a self-satisfactory smile. Turning back to me once more, he said, "Then, alright. Shall I just speak to you?"

"About what?"

"What would you like to hear about?" smiled Neo-san with his meaty face. "I shall speak to you about anything you want. Any topic you want."

"....."

"Hmm? What? What is it? Are you being weary, being weary perhaps, maybe?"

"I am not being weary," I answered calmly. "I have no reason to. I simply make it a point not to trust anyone who speaks a lot. People who smile with their face and disdain people with their soul are always scheming something. I am not fond of people who scheme."

"How harsh, indeed," and Neo-san slapped his own face. His motions were all quite flamboyant. You could even say he was overacting. "However, leaving trustworthiness aside, don't you have anything you want to talk about? For example, about Utsurigi-san."

"....."

"Hm? What's wrong? You want to hear, don't you? About Utsurigi-san."

Utsurigi Gaisuke.

I intended not to react, but it seemed my shoulders moved just a bit when I heard that name. And that was enough of an acknowledgement to Neo-san, as he loudly clapped his hands together and said, "Alright, gotcha."

"That's right. You all came to see Utsurigi-san, after all. Of course you'd want to hear about Utsurigi-san. Of course of course of course. You know, Utsurigi-san, he's quite the talent. Or should I say, he's quite outstanding? That person is..."

“A pervert.”

Koutari-san finished Neo-san’s line with decisiveness. I glanced at Koutari-san, or rather, I could not determine his expression because of his hair, but he did not seem any different than before, and so there was no sense of him disparaging someone, but rather that he had said it matter-of-factly.

“Is a pervert. Without a doubt.”

”..... I see.”

I could only nod.

Speaking of which, Shito-kun had also said something like that about Utsurigi. However, there was a certain lack of tact for calling a colleague who lived in the same facility a *pervert*. Indeed, this may be an abnormal, far-out-of-the-ordinary place lorded by a person named *Mad Demon*, but for Utsurigi *Green Green Green* Gaisuke to be treated in such a way certainly made you wonder what sort of existence he is.

It was beginning to be far out of my realm of imagination.

“Pervert is quite cruel, Koutari-san. Pervert is too cruel no matter how you look at it. There’s something called tact, you know,” Neo-san whacked the unresponsive Koutari-san’s shoulder. “He’s quite odd, for sure. After all, he hasn’t taken **a single step** out of the seventh ward since he’s come here. You’ve gotta bow your head to that. Though, he’s probably not an obsessive researcher like the professor–”

“He does not come out, you mean.”

I thought of asking if that was a mistake for him being locked up, but I restrained myself. There is no meaning to debating with Neo-san here and now. To be honest, this sort of silver tongued, flamboyantly theatrical type of person is my worst enemy. It would be better even to have to take on a Yamitsuki somewhere.

“Yes yes, speaking of Utsurigi-san there was an interesting episode,” clap, he struck his hands together in a theatrical act of just remembering. “It was about a half year ago. There was this two-headed monkey–”

“What are you talking about, Neo-san.”

Neo-san’s story ended abruptly again. This time the suspect was not Koutari-san but rather Shito-kun, with a scowl, who was standing over us and looking down. I could see Suzunashi-san behind Shito-kun. Then,

because of her short stature I could not see her, but Kunagisa was probably behind him as well.

"Yo, Oogaki-kun."

Neo-san raised a hand in greeting with a grin, as if it were all deliberate.

"Thank you for your hard work."

"But no thanks to you at all, Neo-san," said Shito-kun with heavy emphasis, as if peeved. "What were you talking about? What were you just about to tell this thing?"

Thing, he called me.

"Nothing. Nothing important. Nothing important at all. I said absolutely nothing. I am a silent character, after all. All I did was greet him a bit, just a little bit. Right, Koutari-san? That's right, isn't it?"

"Don't ask me."

Koutari-san said shortly and coldly, and then stood from his seat. He passed by Shito-kun, and then walked down the hall toward the professor's visitor's room.

"Hey, hey. Really, what a bind. What am I supposed to do, jeez. Come on, wait," and then Neo-san also lifted his enormous body from the sofa, as if to follow Koutari-san. "Jeez... so impatient, Koutari-san. Ahh, well then, young man, that's all for now. I wander around the facility a lot, so we'll probably meet again. Let's have a chat then, this time for longer."

And then this time, as if ignoring Shito-kun, he bowed to Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa.

"Hello, hello, what beautiful ladies. Please make yourself at ease, welcome to the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility."

He lowered his head so much I wondered if it would touch the floor. Straightening back up and boldly chuckling, he turned to me and said, "Well, see you," and followed Koutari-san.

"..... Inoji. What's that?" Suzunashi-san said with utter curiosity. "It's been a long time since I've been called a beautiful lady."

"Boku-sama-chan too," Kunagisa looked exasperated as she watched Neo-san off. "Who is that? Ii-chan."

"Neo Furuara-san... the one with the long hair was Koutari-san. Koutari Hinayoshi-san."

However, he said *see you*. It was a way of talking that set a next meeting as a premise. He did seem the type that had a high encounter rate, but, in

that case it seems an unnecessary flag was raised.

"Hmph," Shito-kun harrumphed in a despising way. "Such thoughtless people... to converse with this, to talk to this is a travesty for a fellow of this facility."

My. Am I being talked rudely about?

Ignoring Shito-kun, who continued muttering loud enough to hear, I asked Suzunashi-san behind him, "How did things go, I say?" Hmm, a bit of Neo-san's flamboyancy had rubbed off on me. Perhaps the same had happened to Suzunashi-san, as she spread out her arms, as if to embrace me, and said "Positively!" with a theatrical motion.

"The details were a bit rough. But in any case, we were given permission to see Utsurigi Gaisuke immediately."

"That's how it is, Ii-chan," Kunagisa said while swaying her blue hair. "Shito-chan's going to guide us now."

"Don't call me Shito-chan!" shouted Shito-kun, cutting short his muttering and spinning to us. "You're acting overly familiar! I don't know what it is between you and the professor, but stop being friendly with me!"

"But if you think about it, Shito-chan feels more right," I nodded in agreement. "As a nineteen-year-old, there is an obligation to call a sixteen-year-old person with a -chan."

"There's no such thing! Are you screwing with me? Are you screwing with me! Huh!?" Shito-kun shouted at us. "Cut it out! Or are you making fun of me in a roundabout way!?"

"I had no intention of being roundabout; however, this does seem to be set in stone now... I understand Shito-chan's feelings, but it is not something that can be dealt with by me alone."

"Shito-chan, if you don't like it, I'll call you Shitopi-chan."

"Don't! If you make fun of me one more time, I'm going to really be mad!"

"Understood, Shito-chan."

"Roger that, Shito-chan."

And then Suzunashi-san punched both Kunagisa and I.

3

What was unexpected was that when we were leaving the ward – in other words, when we were leaving the building, the card key, the code entry into the number lock, and the voice recognition and retinal recognition, were all required. To need to do this not only for entry but also for leaving was care and then care and then even more care, like a maximum security prison. Shito-kun said "Don't leave on your own," but it appeared that is an impossible task to begin with.

"The seventh ward is this way," Shito-kun said with his usual curt way of talking. "God – why do I have to guide them... this isn't part of my job at all."

Kunagisa Tomo and I walked a bit of a distance behind. Suzunashi-san said "I want to take a look around the building. Investigating, investigating," and was still wandering about the first ward. Suzunashi-san had quite a strong sense of curiosity, so there must have been things she wanted to take the opportunity to look at. She was being guided around by Misachi-san. Misachi-san was beautiful in her own right, but was not really a bishoujo, so it should hopefully be alright.

"In any case, Tomo," I spoke to Kunagisa as we walked beside each other. "What did you speak to professor Kyouichirou about? We were granted a meeting pretty quickly. I thought they would be hesitant about these things, and so the professor would try to procrastinate as much as possible."

"You're right. Yup, that's right. For boku-sama-chan it's technically technically expected, but this sort of expected is discomforting," Kunagisa said as she rubbed the back of her head, which had been smacked by Suzunashi-san. "He's probably confident."

"Confident?"

"Yup, confident with regards to Sacchan. Really, that sort of person... really, he must have really found out a lot, the professor. A lot happened so it's as expected as it was expected. Researcher – no, that's more the

personality of an academic. Or rather, more a lifestyle than a personality, probably."

Kunagisa said with a bit of disappointment, as if she was saddened by the gradual loss of something. I did not know what to say to that Kunagisa, so I just averted my eyes from the awkwardness, and changed the subject. "By the way."

"How do they get electricity this deep into the mountains? Are there power lines? Even if there are waterways and gas. Even if there are phone lines."

"No idea. Hey, how is it, Shito-chan?"

Kunagisa called out to Shito-kun. Shito-kun had in turn apparently given up on that name, and while he looked unhappy, he said nothing about it, and simply snorted.

"**That's it**," and he pointed toward a building to our side. "Eighty-percent is generated from in-house. Research and experimentation and such take up a lot of electricity, so we do have a power line running to us, but we have to generate our own."

"Hmm. Then, this building–"

"The sixth ward."

"The interior of the sixth ward is composed of an electrical power plant. I was wondering because it was not a research building, but I see–," and then I looked up. With a glance, I noted that it looked like the first ward that we were in just now as well as the other buildings – no windows – but. "Do not tell me there is a nuclear power plant stuffed inside."

"We wouldn't make something that dangerous, idiot," Shito-kun struck down my worries in one blow. "It's a hydrogen power plant, hydrogen."

"What is a hydrogen power plant?"

"Powering electricity using hydrogen. Can't you figure from the name?"

It was an incredibly rough explanation, but Shito-kun did not seem like he was willing to give any further explanations, having turned back forward. We walked leisurely along the space between the greenery and the building that supposedly was a *hydrogen power plant*. It appeared Utsurigi Gaisuke's seventh ward was on the other side of this sixth ward. Given its numeric order, the seventh ward was probably created last.

"However, the buildings are all placed close to each other," I mumbled to neither Kunagisa nor Shito-kun as I recalled the blueprint of the laboratory

wards. “Isn’t that dangerous in the case of earthquakes and fires?”

“Unyun,” Kunagisa looked at the first ward and then the sixth ward, and nodded. “Yup. There’re problems for dealing with earthquakes and such. But because it’s in the mountains, there’re other architectural restrictions. Of course, this is just hearsay from Nao-kun. But even so, isn’t this still better than Tokyo?”

“Well, that is right, but. Come to think of it, have you even been to Tokyo, have you even seen that place?”

“Ii-chan hasn’t either.”

“But I have been to Houston.”

“That’s not a brag at all.”

It was not.

I spontaneously decided to look at the sky and noticed that it had become cloudier. It was still just evening, but not a single ray of light made it through, or rather it had become as dark as night. It was like raven-colored clouds had dominated the heavens in a ghastly way.

– Then.

Bump, Kunagisa ran into my back.

“Auh, sorry, Ii-chan.”

“No, do not worry,” I stepped aside, letting Kunagisa pass. “I was spaced out, too. I was looking at the sky.”

“Yup? Ah, you’re right. Looks like bad weather. Like it’ll rain. Hey, Shito-chan?”

”..... What.” Shito-kun said back, a line that should be a question but lacked a question mark. “Did you call me.”

“Yup. How high up are we? It looks like we’re lower than the cloud.”

“Don’t ask me,” Shito-kun sighed. Not that I could speak for others, but despite being young, his sigh implied many years of hardship. “Why would I know something like that?”

“Even though you live here?”

“Then do you know the altitude of where you live?”

Uni, Kunagisa folded her arms. Shito-kun sighed once more and then plodded forward. Yes, it seemed Shito-kun had come to realize that Kunagisa is a rather difficult person to deal with. Becoming angry at Kunagisa is just a waste of effort.

“What’s wrong, Ii-chan? Let’s go.”

“Ahh. Yeah.”

I nodded, and I subtly glanced behind us, and followed Kunagisa. Only trees were left behind us, and I could not see anyone.

”.....”

Of course, I did not bump into Kunagisa because I was looking up at the sky. I am not refined enough to look at rainclouds with any sort of passion. Even if I were to look at rainclouds, I would only think, “Ahh, it is cloudy. Quite cloudy indeed.” No, the reason why I suddenly stopped was because I sensed something unpleasant behind. *Something unpleasant* only comes across as vague, so allow me to rephrase that with more specificity.

I felt something watching us from behind.

I do not know for sure if it was someone watching, but in any case I felt *we were being watched*, or *someone was tracking us*. Of course, just as I had not noticed Koutari-san and Neo-san approaching in the first ward, I am not particularly sensitive to such things. Not sensitive, but it did not mean I am especially insensitive. I have enough senses such that if I do feel it, then I can determine whether I felt it for sure.

However, who could it be? The first to come to mind were professor Kyouichirou or a subordinate fellow (for instance, Koutari-san or Neo-san from earlier), or perhaps the professor’s secretary Misachi-san, but none of that really fit. A sufficient beholder named Shito-kun stood right in front of my eyes. There was no meaning to go to through the pain of double-checking.

”..... Tomo. Have you done anything evil lately?”

“I haven’t. Recently, at all,” Kunagisa responded quizzically. “What? What do you mean with that? If I did something evil, is Ii-chan going to scold me? Sounds exciting.”

“No, if you have not, then it is fine.”

Indeed, Kunagisa had barricaded herself in Shirosaki’s house of late, and had been pouring herself into something suspicious, but I had not heard of her actually doing anything. Even if there were problems related to that *something suspicious*, I could not imagine it was something that would merit being stalked this deep in the mountains.

Perhaps it was an animal or something, I tried to steer my thoughts toward realism. I felt like it was simply a favorable interpretation, but I also felt like it was the only reasonable answer. This place was completely

surrounded by a high wall, so even if it were to be animal it would have to be a bird, so that would mean that I had at least come to the point where I could sense the eyes of birds. That would indeed to be quite a level up in skill, but I also felt like it was a very superhuman power.

"It is nonsense akin to placing the price tag by its side..."

It was sufficient for a scarlet contractor to be the only one with such a skill.

Following Shito-kun's lead, we walked past the sixth ward and turned a corner to see the seventh ward. As expected, just like the other buildings, it was a windowless, dice-shaped building. It seemed slightly smaller than the power-plant sixth ward. Although from where I stood, the height seemed similar.

"..... Hmm–"

So he is inside – the cracker for *Team*, *Green Green Green* Utsurigi Gaisuke.

For some reason Kunagisa held my hand. I glanced at her and noticed that it seemed that, like me, she was pondering something, as she looked up at the laboratory. I did not know why she grabbed my hand, but in any case, I held her hand back.

"What're you two daydreaming for?" Shito-kun said with suspicion. "Jeez. Didn't you two come to see Utsurigi-san? Hurry up and come."

Shito-kun had already arrived at the entrance. He was standing in front of the card reader and tapping his feet with irritation with a hand to his waist. I continued holding Kunagisa's hand and moved us toward him.

"Let me tell you now... I have nothing to do with whatever happens. Absolutely positively nothing. Really, no matter what happens, I'm not going in to help."

"Help? What?" I tilted my head to the side at Shito-kun's words. "I do not really understand what you mean, Shito-chan."

"You two are so persistent... I'm gonna tell that black big sister," Shito-kun looked at us with an unforgiving look. "Jeez... why am I always stuck in this sort of role... so cruel, really. Well, whatever. Anyways, no matter what Utsurigi-san does, I'm not coming to help. Just understand that real good."

"What do you mean by help, Shito-kun," I asked again. "It is not like we are coming to see Dr. Lecter, right? Are you saying Utsurigi Gaisuke is

going to bite off our tongue?"

"……."

I said that as a joke, but Shito-kun muttered, "Correct, Mr. Columbo, and then slid the card through the reader. He entered the code number, and then, "Oogaki Shito. ID is ikwe9f2ma444."

The thick, heavy door slowly opened. Shito-kun entered first, followed by me and then Kunagisa. Shito-kun muttered, "Jeez… really, so unexpected… ugh ugh," and continued down the hall.

"Fourth floor."

He said quickly, and then he opened the steel door at the far end of the corridor, and began climbing the stairs by its side.

"Do you not have elevators? I thought there was one next door."

"Doesn't like them. Utsurigi-san. Elevators," Shito-kun answered without turning around. "So almost everything from the elevator shaft to the box is completely decomposed. He **let off** using hardly any tools."

"……."

I glanced at Kunagisa, but she only mumbled nostalgically, "Sacchan is still the same." It seemed that was not a light joke or anything. I see, *destroyer* and *pervert*. I felt like I was able to see a bit of Utsurigi Gaisuke.

We arrived on the fourth floor. After completing the climb, another key was used to open the door, and we stepped into a white hall. If the central hub of professor Kyouichirou's first ward gave the impression of a hospital, this one gave the impression of a university campus. That came because it did not seem like an atmosphere befitting human life. There was a lack of realism, as if we were inside a theme park.

Shito-kun did not hesitate in selecting a door, and then he stopped. He waited for us to arrive, and then seemed to gather his wits before knocking.

"……."

There was no answer. Shito-kun furrowed his brows with suspicion and knocked again. However, there was still no answer. It remained silent.

"….. That's weird. The professor called him."

"Maybe he is sleeping?"

"Idiot. He received a call, why would he sleep after that," Shito-kun looked at me with exasperation, and then knocked once more. "….. That's weird….."

He knocked a third time and a fourth time, then he finally seemed to give up, and then he sighed, and placed his hand on the knob. And then he said, "It's Oogaki. I'm coming in, Utsurigi-san," and then pulled the door open.

There was no one inside the room.

Shito-kun entered the room, so we did the same. And then, I was surprised by the interior of the room. It was not just that there was no one inside. There was just a single, steel-piped chair in the middle of the room, and there was not one other thing, without any exaggeration or hyperbole, absolutely nothing else in the room. It was like a newly-built mansion room that no one had yet stepped into – yes, a very inhuman atmosphere.

"Shito-kun," I said to Shito-kun. "What room is this?"

"Ah? Utsurigi-san's private room. He's usually here when he's not working, but..."

Private? What about this room was a private room? If such a thing exists, it would not be this place in the least. Without any reason, I walked around this spacious room, which had nothing, and was about the size of twenty tatami.

"Hmm. So this is Sacchan's room..." Kunagisa followed suit. "Hmm. Indeed... indeed... indeed– ufufu."

She seemed satisfied. Was this supposed to also be just as expected of Utsurigi? More and more the term *pervert* seemed more real. No, if this is supposed to be individuality, then I thought that it should instead be expressed as an illness.

Shito-kun was just irritated. He glanced around the room without any purpose, and then began hitting the wall in a furor. Perhaps the walls were sound-proofed, as all that came of it was a powerless slapping sound.

"Shit... did he run away..."

Just as Shito-kun muttered that.

"I haven't run."

From the entrance came a voice. That voice was oddly pointed and shrill, like a hen.

"Would you please refrain from saying rude, incorrect things, Shito-kun? Even if it's rude, I do not mind you mouthing the truth. Even if it's wrong, I will forgive if you speak with respect. But both are unforgivable. Altogether unforgivable, Shito-kun. Or are you saying that there is a reason that I would run away?"

Shito-kun turned, and then I turned, and then Kunagisa turned.

There was one lab-coated man, leaning against the inner frame of the door.

What stood out most was the white hair that did not suit his age. His slender form and long limbs. He looked the part, yet because of that, the lab coat felt lacking for him. He wore white, cotton gloves on each hand. He had a pretty face such that one might glance at him and think him a girl, but his stubble on the end of his chin struck that thought down. And then his orange-colored sunglasses, and the eyes behind them. Those eyes were smiling and laughing, but the back of those eyes were not laughing.

This is. This is.

"U– U U U," Shito-kun's words became stuck in his throat as he said the name. "..... U, Utsurigi-san....."

"Yes, it is Utsurigi-san," Utsurigi flashed a manly smile. "Utsurigi Gaisuke."

"Ah, um....."

Shito-kun seemed to take a step back and turned toward Utsurigi. It was like a rodent was being terrified in front of a carnivore, would be a metaphorical expression of his sudden shift in attitude. Shito-kun was completely cowering in front of Utsurigi, such that you would never think this was the same person who was just now cursing while punching the wall.

Cowering.

Yes, this was absolutely not a display of respect or awe. Shito-kun's emotion was unfortunately understandable for me. I could understand it like it was my own feeling. My emotion standing in front of Utsurigi, my impression having first met Utsurigi Gaisuke, was probably completely the same as emotion of Shito-kun at this very moment.

However, Utsurigi Gaisuke himself did not so much as glance at Shito-kun – or even, of course, me – looking instead in one fixed direction. There is no need to explain what direction that was. None other than one blue-haired girl stood in that direction, with her jaw raised as she looked up at Utsurigi with her eyes.

Utsurigi adjusted his sunglasses, and then curled the right corner of his lip, and then,

"– Yo, *Dead Blue*."

He said, and then he lowered his head deeply.

That sight was so bizarre it was memorable, as an adult man was bowing to a young girl.

"This would be about two years. Would it not. Oh, did you change your hairstyle? You've become much cuter. What happened to that coat? That precious, precious keepsake. Fufu, whatever the case, to be able to see you once again, is both extremely awing and moving to myself."

"To be precise, one year and eight months thirteen days fourteen hours thirty-two minutes and fifteen-point-seven seconds. Of course, seventeen-point-eighty-seven seconds have passed since our reunion. Yup, right – **I** am glad we were able to meet again."

Replied the one who used to lead him.

"It's truly been a while, *Green Green Green*."

[1)] Suzunashi (鈴無音音) is written repetition (2x) of a sound (音) without (無) a bell(鈴).

二日目（3）——青い檻

Day 1 (3)

Blue Cage

0

Hard work always creates something.
Not that it will necessarily connect to results.

1

“That Kunagisa brat.....” Shito–kun said to me, as if he were speaking to himself. ”..... What in the world is she? What in the world kind of person is she?”

“Hmm?” It took me a bit of time to determine that those words were intended for me, and I responded one tempo late. ”..... Not a brat - she is nineteen after all.”

”..... I see.”

Normally he would have snapped something back there, but Shito-kun simply nodded powerlessly.

The smoking room on the fourth floor of the seventh ward. Shito-kun and I were sitting across from each other. Neither of us could be considered smokers, but we were just killing time. That said, time kills itself like this, so the expression may be off. It may be better to rephrase it as us clinging to time in order to prevent time from being killed. The theory is completely wrong, but as a phrase, it was not bad for describing this situation.

I glanced down the hall. I focused my eyes on one of the doors lining the wall, as if I were peeking through to the other side. Of course, it was quite the distance, and I did not possess powers of clairvoyance like a fortune-teller on some island, so there was no way I could see what was taking

place on the other side. That *Dead Blue* and *Green Green Green* were having some sort of conversation.

What they were talking about I could not fathom. I had no clue.

"..... Utsurigi Gaisuke....."

I mumbled with a low, heavy voice.

His age was probably around thirty. I could not determine whether that white hair was dyed or natural, but his age was probably around that. He had a bit of a light, free-spirited air around him, but that was enough for me to understand that he was not ordinary. One glance was enough for me to understand that he was a person on the other side of a thick, long line somewhere.

Like a red contractor, like a blue savant.

"Hey, listen. Listen, you," Shito-kun said with a bit more strength this time. "That Kunagisa, what in the world is she? I'm asking, so tell me."

"..... Why do you think I would know?"

"Of course you do. You're her lover, aren't you?" Shito-kun said, leaning closer. Shito-kun said, leaning closer. "Someone who can talk to that Utsurigi-san on equal terms, someone who can talk to that Utsurigi-san on equal footing – it's the first time I've seen it happen. No one here – not even the professor – can do that. That's why, even though they're both ex-members of *Cluster*..."

"That is not quite right," I fired a correcting arrow. "Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke were not members. In terms of ranking, Kunagisa had a higher class. She was the leader of *Team*, after all."

"..... Really?"

"Really. Well, I still only half-believe it though. No, thirty-percent-believe it, I think," I shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Totally, certainly like nonsense."

"I can't believe it," said Shito-kun, as he leaned back into the sofa. And then, "Then... what in the world is she?" he asked for the third time.

"Why do you think I would know?" I answered again. "Do you think I would know that? Shito-kun."

"..... You don't know?"

I did not answer. I changed my answer to confirm that with no answer.

Indeed, I do not know. I do not know that Kunagisa Tomo. That Kunagisa Tomo, who spoke with Utsurigi Gaisuke on equal terms. That Kunagisa

Tomo, who was called an eerie, dangerous-sounding alias, *Dead Blue*. Relative to **that**, I could say that I would know more about a person I was meeting for the first time. In that case, I would at least be able to determine that I was speaking to a person.

When it comes to *Dead Blue* – I would not be so sure.

"……."

Who had I been watching this whole time?

No, wrong, that is not the problem. Rather, what had I been watching this whole time? If there is anything to be called nonsense, this would be it. Calling this a misunderstanding would be a joke. Until now, despite being by her side, how much had I missed? No, was there really any point, any instant at all that I had truly, actually been by her side? The way that Utsurigi had once been, to truly be by Kunagisa's side – would I ever be able to do that?

I understood.

The identity of the emotion that I had felt toward Utsurigi, or rather, to the members of *Team*. It was not an emotion as first-class as jealousy or admiration or aspiration. It was a feeling of inferiority that reached repulsive levels when it came to myself. It was an irritating level of despair at my own self. It was a depressing level of disappointment at my own self.

"Hey, you okay?"

Shito-kun's call snapped me out of it. I looked up, and found Shito-kun looking at me with a worried expression. Hn, I shook my head, and answered, "I am alright."

"It is nothing."

"You sure? You looked really sad, you know."

I must have had an incredibly mournful expression to have incurred the worry of this Shito-kun. It must surely have been wretched. I could not imagine it myself, but that must have been the case. This feeling of betrayal certainly felt like it would cause such a look.

"Betrayal… truly, the worst… I am."

I muttered, and shook my head once more. I then slapped my cheeks with both hands, and recomposed myself. Alright. I shall fret and worry a bit later. For now, for now still, let me be swept along as the situation wants to sweep me. Consciously or subconsciously, that is all that I can do for Kunagisa.

“So, Shito-kun – why are you here?”

“Ah? What’s that?” Shito-kun asked back with doubt. “Whaddaya mean. Why I’m here?”

“You do not need to answer if you do not want to. I just figured I’d ask to break the awkward silence. I just thought it was odd that you would be here so young.”

“So young, eh. Is that some sort of sarcasm?”

Shito-kun went silent for a bit. I did not say anything either, not expecting a response, but eventually Shito-kun opened his mouth and said, “I like that professor.”

“That professor – you mean Professor Shadou Kyouichirou?”

“Of course. *Mad Demon* or what have you, he’s an amazing person. I don’t know what’s up with that Kunagisa, but you’re the same, aren’t you?” Shito-kun asked me. “You’re with her because you like her, yeah?”

“Like or dislike… does that not seem a childish notion, Shito-kun?” I slowly shook my head. “It is not that simple. It is just not that simple. If it were, it would make so much more sense.”

“…”

“No, perhaps it is that simple? Maybe it is actually simpler. So simple that I do not know, complex and intricate because it is so simple and obvious – may be what it is. She happened to be in front of me, and I happened to be in front of her – it might be something as simple as having the timing fit. You know, like a digital clock. You just spontaneously look and find the numbers all lined up, just fundamentally being like that, and there is no reason whatsoever to it – that sort of thing.”

“I don’t really get it.”

“Probably. Along with what I do not know, I would like to clarify a misunderstanding with Shito-kun. I am not her lover. I do not know why, but it seems people have misunderstood. It is not something like that – she is a friend, a friend.”

“Huh? Aren’t you two too friendly to be friends? Boy and girl, too.”

“There is no such thing as being too friendly for friends. And gender is irrelevant for friendship… In any case, I do not know how she feels about being called such a thing, but personally I do not find it very pleasant. Shito-kun, you would find it unpleasant to be called professor Kyouichirou’s lover, right?”

Shito-kun folded his arms.

"..... I would."

"Of course you would. And that is how it is. At the very least, it is against my style to have the thought process of wanting to tie everything into romance," I held out both hands. "And someone else is my lover."

"Really. What sort?"

"A high school girl who attends a super elite ojousama school. She is a first-year, so she is fifteen? Her name is Saijou Tamamo, and she likes glittery things, and is a pretty cute tomboy-ish girl. I am pretty lovesick with her [1]. We go out to eat ice cream together a lot. She makes me pay all the time. She eats the cream, and I just get the cone. Well, thus is the weakness of being in love."

"..... Sounds like a made-up story."

"That would be because about half of it is made up."

"Hah. You're a con artist."

"And you are a mochi maker."

"Yeah, yeah. Every New Years we knead it like so and so, and then hammer it and hammer it [2] – why!" Shito-kun shouted. "Why am I playing the straightman for you in a place like this!?"

"Well, I was actually not expecting a straightman..."

It was fun making fun of Shito-kun.

However, it appeared Shito-kun did not find it so amusing, as he looked displeased, saying, "Cut it out, jeez."

"Not that you would– hmm. Speaking of which, what's your name? You haven't told me yet. You were the only one who didn't introduce yourself back then."

Hmm? I tilted my head to the side. Given what Neo-san had said, it was clear that professor Kyouichirou had investigated us already, so I had assumed that it was probable that they also knew my name, but perhaps they had not dug deep enough? Or perhaps they had assumed I was just an extra for Kunagisa Tomo and thus had not bothered finding out. Ah, no, that is wrong. Regardless of whether they knew my name or not, Shito-kun must have been told to *guide Kunagisa Tomo and her associates*, so he must not have been informed. Shito-kun had expressed great admiration for the professor earlier, but would he still feel the same if he were to find out how

he was actually viewed? As an ally that had been deceived for the purpose of deceiving the enemy?

"..."

Well, he probably could. The explanation made sufficient sense, after all.

"Hey, what's wrong? Do you not have a name?"

"Well... Hmm. My name is Spooky E."

"..... Uh huh."

I had braced myself with some level of expectation, but this time, Shito-kun did not play the straightman. Rather, he seemed to respond coldly to it.

"..... Um, so you're wanting to say that because it's *E* you're called *Ii-chan* – that supposed to be the punchline?"

"Correctly so, rightly so."

"....."

"Idachi Ikuyo would suffice."

"....."

Shito-kun seemed to have given up on something with me, and after turning away and sighing deeply, returned to the original subject, "Not that you would–"

"Not that you would understand why I'm here, even if I were to explain the reason. Of course you can't, you can't possibly get it."

"Right. No one likes being told that other people know how they feel. ..... Speaking of which, this April, I met a fortune-teller who knows everything about other peoples' thoughts."

"Ah? Another one of your lies."

"This is more nonsense than a lie, though. Though I cannot go into details. In any case, it is a person from whom Shito-kun and anyone else would be unable to hide a single thing."

"Basically, a master of psychology?"

A very logical interpretation. I nodded, "That is one way to look at it."

"Shito-kun, what do you think? About those things."

"What do I think? Of course I hate that crap," Shito-kun tilted his head at my question, looking like he did not understand. "Having your thoughts out in the open all the time, at the very least, wouldn't be pleasant. It's just like you said."

"No, I did not mean that... Not our side, but how do you think they feel? Knowing everything that other people are thinking."

“Pretty convenient, isn’t it?”

”... Convenient. ..... Perhaps.”

I nodded at Shito-kun’s answer, which came without any hesitation whatsoever. But if that fortune-teller were to hear that, we would have received some sort of retort.

Ahh, come to think of it.

Even with that fortune-teller’s ability to read minds, Kunagisa Tomo’s mind could not be read. One could theorize that the reason that Kunagisa Tomo’s mind could not be read was because it was far too deep. Her brain was processing so much more than a normal person that it would be incredibly difficult to decipher what was going on inside.

And just then, Mysterious Object X passed by the side of our smoking room – no, I know of its identity now, so the janitor maid robot passed by. This time, the steel cylinder did not mistake people as trash, and instead sped right down the hall. I see, that robot is stationed at every research ward.

“So you were the one who made that janitor maid robot, Shito-kun?”

“Ah?” Shito-kun furrowed his brows. “Well, yeah, right. But where’d you hear that?”

“Neo-san.”

”–That bastard,” Shito-kun clicked his tongue in irritation. “Freakin’ loose lips.”

“Calling a senior a bastard is quite wrong. But that is still admirable. Making a maid robot is truly amazing. Yes, I prefer an old type of maid, but I do not think that sort of new type is bad.”

“Stop calling it a maid robot. Only Neo-san says that crap.”

Without any semblance of pride or joy, Shito-kun said, “That’s nothing,” as if being praised for such a trivial thing was more annoying than anything else.

“Even elementary schoolers can build something like that as long as they have the parts and tools.”

“Indeed. That would be the difference with the older type of maids.”

I nodded in agreement, but I actually prefer the older type of maids.

”..... Hey, Shito-kun. One more question about maids.”

“What?”

“I heard Utsurigi-san does not leave this place, but is that true?”

“Leaving the question of how that relates to maids at all aside...” Shito-kun asked back with suspicion. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Umm. This was from Neo-san too.”

”.....” Shito-kun froze in place with his posture. ”..... Shit. That bastard.”

“I said calling a senior a bastard is quite wrong.”

“That bastard is that bastard. He’s a guy, so he’s a bastard. I’m doing nothing wrong. And if you want to go by seniority, I’ve got seniority on Neo-san. I’ve been here longer. Neo-san’s the newest one here, after all... Yeah. So what’s up? Utsurigi-san hasn’t taken a single step out of here – is that a problem for you?”

“No, that is not what I meant.....” I absent-mindedly ignored his rambling. “But indeed, this place is filled with quirky people. Utsurigi-san, of course, but it is hard to call you ordinary as well, and professor Kyouichirou and Koutari-san and Neo-san and Dr. Kokoromi. Truly a collection of intellectuals, a random pounding of talented people. *Mad Demon* seems to not refer solely to professor Kyouichirou.”

“I’m ordinary. Don’t be subtly rude. .... Hmm? Hey you, you’ve met not just Koutari-san and Neo-san, but also Miyoshi-san?”

“Ah, no not like that. I just know of Miyoshi Kokoromi-san through rumors. She has quite a colorful trail of human dissection and biological dissection, so even I know of her.”

“Really, now. Well, that person is pretty famous... and she did work where she worked before she came here, so I guess it’s not that odd that you’d know of her. Anyways, I’m ordinary. Not just me, everyone’s ordinary. We may look odd from the perspective of a commoner like you, but that’s just a problem with your level of comprehension.”

“Hmm... that may be the case. That probably is the case.”

I nodded, but it was questionable as to whether Utsurigi was part of that *everyone*. However, I decided not to pursue that matter. If I were to pursue it, then naturally, Kunagisa would become part of that conversation, and I did not have confidence that I could remain calm if that happened.

“A problem with my level of comprehension...”

Is that the case? That may be the case. That may not be the case. However, probably, it is the case. Such is how these things are. In the end,

the problem comes back to me. Despite the level of depth, it becomes a simple, logical matter. It was like Murphy's Law.

According to which, all difficult equations boil down to an answer of either zero or one.

"Zero, eh..."

Then, I heard the creaking sound of a hinge. I turned my head toward that direction, and saw Kunagisa stepping out of the room. She closed the door behind her, swiveled her head about, and froze completely when our eyes met.

"Ah, Ii-chan, discovered!"

Kunagisa said, and then she ran over. Just when you might have thought she'd arrived at the smoking room at full speed, she showed no signs of slowing her pace. In fact, she seemed to accelerate, and then jumped at me. I was used to this sort of behavior though, and skillfully reducing her impact while ensuring that neither of us would be hurt, I caught her.

"Heheeeh," Kunagisa seemed to giggle as she wrapped her arms around my back, embracing me. "I'm home, Ii-chan."

I hesitated for a moment, and then responded, "Welcome home, Tomo."

We were as natural as we had always been.

For now, this was sufficient. Alright, I thought.

Think of it as alright.

"..... Thanks for that sight, but," Shito-kun groaned with displeasure. "If we're done here, let's get back. Go flirt somewhere else. I was told to bring you two back to the Professor when the meeting is done."

"You seem more like a grunt than an assistant."

"Shut up! I'll kill you!" he said irritably (not that I fault his anger). Standing up abruptly, he sauntered off. I tried to follow after him, but Kunagisa would not let go, so all I could do was stand up.

"Hey, Tomo. I will let you hug me all you want later, so let go for now."

"Umm. Sure, but," Kunagisa said, as she surprisingly quickly let go. And then she turned to Shito-kun. "Shito-chan, wait a second."

"Ah? Why do I hafta wait? Are you going to hug me too?"

"As if. Um, Sacchan..." Kunagisa gave me a side-ward glance. And then she looked back at Shito-kun. "Wants to talk to Ii-chan."

"Ah? What?" "Ah? What?"

Shito-kun's doubt-filled voice and my surprised voice were almost completely in harmony. Shito-kun's voice would be the bass and my voice the tenor. However, a short duet of two men was not particularly pleasant to hear. Shito-kun and I ended up steeped in an awkward silence, and so in an effort to get away from that, I turned to Kunagisa and asked again, "What?"

"I said Sacchan wants to talk to Ii-chan."

"Is that so?"

"Why!?" Shito-kun shouted. No, more like yelled. "Why would Utsurigi-san want to talk to this guy?"

"This time it is *this guy*... should you not get a scolding from Suzunashi-san?" I sighed, jeez. "But I agree with that opinion. Tomo, why did Utsurigi say he wanted to talk to me?"

"I dunno," Kunagisa answered indifferently. "Anyways, when boku-sama-chan was leaving the room, Sacchan said, *Can you ask the boy whose eyes were like those of a dead fish to come in? I would like to speak to him, just the two of us.*"

"All he said was *the boy whose eyes were like those of a dead fish*, right? Then maybe he was talking about Shito-kun."

"Of course not." "Of course not."

This time it was the duet of a soprano and a bass.

"It's obviously you." "It's obviously Ii-chan."

"Of course." "Of course."

A hymn started. I did not understand what was going on. I said, "Well, that aside," and forcibly interrupted the hymn.

"Let us leave what my eyes are like aside, for now. Why was I called by Utsurigi?"

"I said, I don't know. Don't ask boku-sama-chan. You'll find out when you go, right?" said Kunagisa, pointing at the door she just came through. "Go ahead and take the chance to talk to him, Ii-chan. It'll probably be fun. Boku-sama-chan will wait here."

And then Kunagisa plopped herself down on the sofa. Shito-kun came back down the hall and did the same, muttering, "What's going on, jeez."

"You two really can't be helped. Well, be off with you then. I'll be waiting here, too."

"You could go back, you know."

“And I said that if I did, you two wouldn’t be able to get out. Why do you think I’m stuck here without anything else to do?” Shito-kun slapped the table. “Hey, hurry up and go.”

“Alright... I understand.”

Anyways, it seemed I had no choice but to go. I do not know why Utsurigi called for me, but I did not seem to have any other option. I did not really want to, but it seemed I had to. I whispered to Kunagisa, “Be careful, and shout if anything happens,” outside of earshot of Shito-kun, walked across the hall, and stopped in front of the door.

I turned around to face Kunagisa.

“Hey!”

I shouted.

“Tomo, was it fun, talking to Utsurigi?”

“It was fun.”

It was a simple answer. Truly, a truly Kunagisa Tomo-like answer. However, right now, currently, I lacked an understanding of that -*like*. What did it mean to be Kunagisa Tomo-like? Something that simple had become very vague. I no longer knew. It was like a deteriorating copy had begun seeping through to the back of the sheet.

My thoughts regarding Kunagisa, and Kunagisa’s thoughts regarding me.

Perhaps this is the decisive moment for me to anchor my foot. At the very least, the Kunagisa Tomo who was sitting right next to Shito-kun over there should be the Kunagisa Tomo I know, I thought as I knocked on the door and pulled it open.

“Yo – nice to meet you.”

And.

I had not even entered when I was greeted by that high tone. It was a voice that could fool anyone into believing that it came from a woman, like a forced falsetto, the sort of voice that could absolutely not be called mellow, like the sound of a sharpened blade.

I entered the room, closing the door behind me. And then I said the same, “Nice to meet you.” And Utsurigi smiled, a warm laugh.

He was sitting on the steel-piped chair, the one and only piece of furnishing for the room. His legs were crossed, he had adopted a

completely relaxed posture, and he was facing me. His chin was raised just a bit, as if he were looking down upon me, and he peered at my expression.

No words came forth. Toward Utsurigi, not a single word came to mind.

"–I wish you would not tighten up so much." Utsurigi was the one to eventually speak. "You were like that before when we had a glimpse of each other, you know. Why do you look at me like a sworn enemy? It's been quite some time since I've spoken to a human like this. I'm pretty sure I haven't done anything to you yet, hey? You know, Shito-kun is the way he is, so he won't speak to me or look at me or even come close to me whenever we cross paths, and the others never come this way. Despite appearances, I love company very much. I'm a purely lonely. So lonely, so lonely that it cannot be helped. That's why, if you will, please, say something?"

"Quite some time?"

I tilted my head to the side at that. At the same time, I felt some of my nervousness dissipate. At the very least, he seemed like someone who I could converse with. I moved a bit while maintaining a set distance from Utsurigi, and leaned against the wall to the right. I turned toward Utsurigi once more.

"What are you talking about? Were you not just speaking to Kunagisa?"

"With *Dead Blue*? Woah there," Utsurigi chuckled. It was a terribly human-like action, which I suppose is obvious, but because it was obvious, I felt a terrible sense of misplacement. "Oh, please. I don't know what to say to that. Shouldn't you know that best? Or are you saying that *Dead Blue* –Kunagisa Tomo is a human being?"

"....."

"Communicating with **that** is an impossible task for anyone. Impossible for me as well as you as well as anyone else. Is that not right?"

While he seemed to want agreement and his eyes appeared to be laughing, as expected, I did not sense even a bit of lightheartedness behind those eyes. It was like he was waiting to pounce on any opening I gave, such was his expression. I care-freely responded, "I do not think so."

"More importantly, Utsurigi-san."

"Utsurigi suffices. Also, why don't you take a seat, instead of standing there?"

"On the floor?"

“It’s cleaned often, so it’s not dirty. Of course, it wasn’t I that cleaned it, but rather the machine that Shito-kun made.”

“I will stand.”

Is that so, Utsurigi nodded.

I shifted even more of my weight toward the wall, and lessened the burden on my left leg. It was so that I could run at any moment. Although I felt such a need would not arise, there was no merit to being unprepared.

“Utsurigi-san, did you have something you wished to speak to me about?”

“I said Utsurigi would suffice, didn’t I?” Utsurigi’s shoulders trembled. “I hate being suffixed with -*san*. There is no reason for you to be calling me such, and I would like to say the same to Shito-kun. Truly, a bothersome thing. Those in *Cluster* always called me without any formalities, and that was the most natural.”

”... what do you mean by Cluster?” I could not help but ask. “I have heard that name several times since we had come... is it a different name for *Team*?”

“I think a different name lacks accuracy,” Utsurigi raised his index finger. “We had no name in the first place. So we all just called it what we wished. I generally called it *Cluster*. That has simply become the normal means of referring to it here. Well, I made it normal. If I remember correctly, *Cheetah* called it *Mates*. *Reverse Cross (Night-travel Crime)* called it *Russell (Gathering of Paradox)*[3]. And *Double Flip (Double-layered World)* even made a nice pun for it, *Inside (Within the Territory)*. It wasn’t just irony or something, **that** enjoyed playing with words. And then, and then..., heheh, well, everyone did what they wanted the way they wanted. There were some that changed the way they referred to themselves every time, so we had no real name or different name or true name or anything. I called us *Cluster (Flock)*, that’s all. –And then *Dead Blue* called it *Team (Comrades)*.”

Team.

That word sucked air out of my lungs.

“Woah, you tightened up again just now, right when you were finally beginning to loosen up. Did something I say strike a nerve? If so, I apologize. I’m not blessed with the opportunity to speak to others much, so I’m not very learned in the arts of politeness. Please don’t take it the wrong way.”

"No, I do not mind. I do not mind at all. More importantly, Utsurigi-san."

"I said to call me without the honorifics... Whatever. I don't expect for all of my wants to be accepted. Continue; what is it?"

"What did you speak to Kunagisa about?"

Utsurigi fell silent for just a moment after hearing my question, and then said, "You."

"You call her *Kunagisa*?"

"... Answer my question, please."

"I'll answer if you answer, let's go with even negotiations. My question first, what do you normally call *Dead Blue*? Just the way I once called ourselves *Cluster*, what do you call her?"

"....."

"Incidentally, this Utsurigi Gaisuke uses *Dead Blue* when speaking to her directly. Sometimes that's also the case when speaking to a third party, but if I speak to that third party and reference her, it becomes *Kunagisa Tomo*. I sometimes abbreviate it to *Verge* when referring to her as an abstract entity. Very rarely, I say *that*. That would be the four I use."

I did not understand the point behind his question, so I hesitated a little. However, no matter how you took it, it did not seem like a question that had an ulterior motive. Then, perhaps, it was just simple curiosity. I decided to answer honestly.

"When I speak to her directly, I call her by her first name, *Tomo*. If I am trying to get her attention, *hey, you*. When speaking about her with someone else, I use her surname *Kunagisa*, and when referring to her, *her*. The only exception is when I speak to Nao-san... Kunagisa's older brother, if I refer to her I say *your sister*. He dislikes having her name spoken aloud."

"You speak as if you were narrating for someone else. No, nothing wrong with that. Your past is essentially someone else, after all."

So said Utsurigi, as he repeated to himself, "Hmm, *Tomo*, *Kunagisa*, *hey, you*, *her*, *your sister*..."

"I see... so that's the kind of person you are. Understood understood, I get it."

"Was it some sort of psychological test?" I had regained a bit of composure, and naturally asked with a comparative voice. "So? What sort of twisted emotion do I have with regards to Kunagisa?"

“That may be better left unsaid. No, ignorance is bliss, perhaps,” Utsurigi said without any shyness. “Still, you are quite gloomy. Despite those dead-fish eyes of yours.”

“Saying they are like dead fish is a bit much. The Professor said *good eyes*.”

“Good eyes they are. Truly impressive levels of rotting. When I speak to you like this, it reminds me of *Cheetah*.”

Utsurigi grinned, clearly enjoying himself. Whether that meant he purely enjoyed speaking to me, or whether that meant he enjoyed observing me, or whether that meant he was only acting like he enjoyed himself while he did not enjoy himself in the slightest, I could not tell.

”... I answered, so please answer my question. Utsurigi-san. What did you speak to Kunagisa about?”

“You can imagine, can’t you? What do you think we talked about?”

”.....”

“Ah, sorry, sorry. It’s alright, I’m not Socrates. Although they do say my nose looks like his. However, returning a question with a question to make the other think is, well it’s not bad but it’s not my style. I’m more the talkative type, the type that says everything myself.”

“Is that so.”

“Yes. *Dead Blue* said, of course – ***I’ll get you out of here***.”

Utsurigi said that with some pride. As if being told that by Kunagisa was the greatest of his achievements.

”... and, what did you say?”

“Rejected. Of course?” Utsurigi said, as if was truly obvious. “We spoke about other things, but those were private, so I’d prefer you understand that. You wouldn’t want to know about how I deal with my sexual urges, right?”

I wonder. No, I do not.

“Why did you reject it?”

“I waved my hand like this and said *No, no, it’s fine*. ... Don’t look at me like that. Do you not get jokes? You don’t need to look at me out of the corner of your eye every time like that. I’m not sitting in a corner, you know.”

Whether he found his own pun amusing or for a different reason I did not know, but Utsurigi chuckled. It was an infantile sight, belying the age

behind his whitened hair.

"Let's alternate questions, then. It's my turn, isn't it? Let's make sure we're both in agreement about the order."

"..... Then, go ahead." I nodded, half-carelessly. "But, do you actually have more to ask me?"

"Yes. Plenty."

He had plenty.

"Then how about we start with a jab....., have you kissed Kunagisa Tomo?"

"....."

I truly felt like I wanted to walk away.

"Incidentally, I never have."

Of course. If you were to have done that to a minor at your age, it would be a crime with no room to say excuses. Not so much a social crime, but more a crime as a person.

"So, how about you?"

"..... I have," this time, I really, truly carelessly answered. "So?"

"No, I just felt envious. Continue."

"Continue what. It is my turn to ask a question, is it not?" I raised my face a bit, staring at the smiling face of Utsurigi. "Why did you reject her? Do you not want to leave this place?"

"An odd question, from both you and *Dead Blue*," Utsurigi suddenly sounded bored. "You two are both saying a terribly bizarre thing. I was invited here as a fellow, you know? I get paid wages, and I'm living a pretty comfortable life. It's not like I'm imprisoned here or held captive or anything."

"..... the academic achievements that Professor Shadou Kyouichirou has attained, the results of scientific research that he had presented to the Kunagisa House **as his own reputable work**, I hear that close to ninety-percent of that was actually **the work of Utsurigi Gaisuke**."

"Who knows? I don't know what you're talking about. I've never heard anything like that. Isn't that just a trick?" chuckled Utsurigi. "There's a lot of gossip in the world about taking credit for others' work, after all."

"If you are not imprisoned, then, Utsurigi-san, then of course you have a means of leaving this research facility – no, even this seventh ward?" I persisted. "For example, do you have a laboratory ID card that goes into

the card readers? Do you have your voice and retina stored in the lock database?"

"....."

Utsurigi went silent. And then, with a scrutinizing, squinting look, he stared at me. I deliberately, half-forcibly ignored that, and continued speaking.

"Have you ever left this place? I have heard otherwise. ..... Despite offering your entire spec to Professor Kyouichirou, despite having your freedom completely suppressed, do you still feel the lack of a need to leave this place?"

"You talk big, **young one**." Utsurigi closed both of his eyes. Opening his right eye, he continued, "You talk about freedom at your age? At the age of nineteen, you talk largely about something like freedom? How very crass."

"..... According to Kunagisa... no, to be more precise, according to Chii-kun, but my understanding of you is that Professor Kyouichirou has **some sort of blackmail** on you to restrain you here..."

"Hahah! *Blackmail*!" Utsurigi clapped his hands loudly in front of him. The dry sound echoed around the room. "*Blackmail* is good! That's an awesome way to put it, coming from that *Cheetah*. Laughable. Too funny. I've never heard something so funny."

"..... Answer my question, Utsurigi-san."

"Hahah, heheheh. Answer your question? Alright. I'll answer, young one," Utsurigi stopped his dry laugh and slowly raised his head. "For example... do you know of the life-form, pig? Or a cow or a chicken would suffice."

"Of course I know about a pig."

"That's great. Then of course you know that a pig was an animal created by domesticating monkeys? Cows and chickens were not really configured as a species like that, but they're pretty similar nonetheless, being domesticated. Domesticated. What do you think about that? They – yes, I'll call them *they* deliberately – can you say that they, as living beings, have succumbed to humanity?"

"..... Is that wrong?"

"Wrong. Not just wrong, it's the opposite. As a result, as a result of being domesticated, as a result of being configured, they became even stronger. Protected by humans, raised by humans, produced by humans, their

market share among the world's animal populace exploded. By living with humans – no, by forming a **parasitic bond** with humans, they acquired an immovable position in the hierarchy of species. Is that wrong?"

"– it only sounds like sophism."

"Sophism is still a form of logic. Similar to how potatoes and sweet potatoes are both potatoes. Now, is my current situation really as bad as you think? I've been given an entire research ward like this, and I can speak to you like this. You say I'm restrained but that's the case no matter where I go. Is there any life in this world that isn't restrained? In the end, to me, watching TV every day and only speaking to a certain set of people every day, while being able to move about, is still being restrained in a certain amount of space. I feel much freer than people like that. At the very least, my mind is a lot freer."

"I cannot think you are being serious."

"It's your **freedom** to think what you may. I have no intent of **restraining** your opinions."

Utsurigi inhaled after those words, and continued, "Now it's my turn to ask a question."

"Have you slept with Kunagisa Tomo?"

"..... Am I going to keep being sexually harassed like this?"

"Who cares? Let's just sit down, man up, and speak our minds like men," Utsurigi made a perverted face. "Incidentally, I've never slept with *Dead Blue*."

"If you have, it would be a crime," I raised both of my hands. "I have not, either."

"You haven't?" he seemed taken aback. "What? Wait, no way. You must be lying."

"It is true. I would not lie about something like that. And I have never gone even close... well, I will not say that at least, but in general we have never crossed that line," I wondered why I was being this open, but I continued answering. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Not at all. Quite dissatisfied. That can't be right," Utsurigi crossed his arms and groaned. "You're a straight man, aren't you? You don't have strange fetishes, right? Or are you actually lusting for me, right now?"

No, I'm not.

I ignored Utsurigi and took my turn.

“In other words, Utsurigi-san, you have no intention of leaving this place?”

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t intend to not leave this place, but I have no reason to leave this place. For example, I hear *Dead Blue* just lives like a hikikomori in her Kyoto mansion. Would you force her to get out? Of course you wouldn’t, would you? There’s no reason for her to step outside. It troubles no one. I’m the same. There’s no reason to go out into space just to learn that space is spacious, is there?”

“In other words, Kunagisa’s actions this time were nothing but a bother to Utsurigi-san?”

“Hey, hey, you don’t need to be that aggressive with your tone,” Utsurigi slightly raised his right shoulder, as if recoiling in horror. “Not at all, of course. I am genuinely pleased by Kunagisa Tomo’s feelings. You could even say that I am moved. And, even otherwise, being able to reunite with *Dead Blue* makes me happy. In that sense I’m quite appreciative of you, for having acted with Kunagisa Tomo. Thank you.”

”….. You’re welcome.”

A sigh. It seemed he was right about being talkative. No matter what angle I tried to attack him from, he would always scatter my vector and ultimately swallow everything up into his own pace.

He only looked like a strange old man, but he was one of Kunagisa Tomo’s Team. I would not be allowed to forget that.

“Now, my turn. Does that mean that Kunagisa Tomo, to you, is not someone you can view as a woman, and that while she is an object of affection, she is not an object of love?”

Oh. This time he asked a relatively normal question.

“In other words, you don’t lust for Kunagisa Tomo’s loli body.”

”…….”

I was a fool for thinking otherwise.

“Incidentally, I do. … I was joking, so please don’t run away. Don’t try to leave. Of course I wouldn’t lust, I’m fifteen years older than her, you know? Of course I wouldn’t do such a thing. Where I was raised, calling someone a lolicon is just a way of greeting someone. It’s true. If you’re recoiling from something like that, you wouldn’t be able to survive where I grew up, you know? Please, stop shooting me that suspicious look.”

”…” I sighed.

I swore that no matter what, I would never go to this guy's birthplace, and wondered if this was the reason why Shito-kun and Koutari-san referred to him as a *pervert*. In that case, Shito-kun's fear was understandable. Subtly, I re-positioned myself so that my hand would easily be able to pull out the knife in my right breast-pocket.

"You kiss Kunagisa Tomo. Embrace. Yet perhaps that is just a level of skinship that you might share with your sister. So one might say that Kunagisa Tomo is like a sister to you? That's not bad at all. They do say that being considered a little sister is in a way the greatest praise that can be heaped upon a lady."

"....."

"Incidentally, I have two little sisters–"

"I do not want to hear it," I immediately interrupted. "And normally, in Japan, people do not kiss their sisters. They also do not embrace."

"What? Seriously?" Utsurigi seemed honestly surprised, as he adjusted his glasses. "– is that the case. Wow, I learned something, today. Thank you. I'm glad I met you."

"..." I sighed. It was not appreciation I enjoyed. "In any case, Kunagisa is not my sister. At the very least, I have never thought such a thing. She may be an existence as close to me as family, but that is an issue of distance."

"Hmm. Your expression seems to hint that you don't care about family. Hmmhmm. I'm beginning to understand. The problem."

"Problem? What entirely was he seeing as a problem of what? This man named Utsurigi was the only problem, for now. I was beginning to feel like I would rather end this conversation and retreat to my room.

That I did not could probably be attributed to Utsurigi having been part of Kunagisa's *Team*. No, I should not say that in past tense, for they still consider each other comrades, and it was because of that, that I stood here continuing to converse. I analyzed myself.

"Then–," I continued my words. And then I took a look around this empty room. "– why, do you call this room with nothing your private room?"

"Woah. You're changing your angle? I see, a plan to get me to let down my guard. Yes, not bad, not bad. That's a sharp way to do things. You have such a cute face, but you're quite vicious. You seem to be a person with more intelligence than you look," Utsurigi was filled with mirth. "The

answer is simple. I dislike when things are messy. In truth – I would rather get rid of this chair, as well, but if I go there I would have to be considered slightly ill."

"I think you are plenty ill as it is."

"No, don't worry. The other rooms are pretty messy. There are some rooms that aren't messy, but at the very least, they're not orderly. I'm not good at organizing, because my specialty is destroying. I'm using this whole fourth floor solely for my own purposes, but if you want, you can take a peek at the third and second floors on your way back. My work rooms are as scattered as an island of dreams."

"I will pass," I turned down Utsurigi's offer. "There are plenty of classified items, I am sure? Shito-kun would be angry at me. And, that was probably why this room was selected as our meeting room."

"Professor Kyouichirou did say something like that... Heheh, he's quite a strict fellow."

At the very least, I was unable to read any emotion, like anger or begrudging, that would be expected from someone who is imprisoned in a space like this from Utsurigi's face, as he referred to Professor Kyouichirou as *he*. That said, I also did not read the opposite, like respect or fondness for one's boss, either.

In fact... I could not imagine whatsoever what this person thought.

"Now, my turn."

"Please go easy on me."

"Leave it to me," Utsurigi said with a rather retro-style boast. "Question. How much interest do you have in the opposite sex?"

"... As normal, I would say," I answered as I tolerated the usual sexual harassment. "Is that not obvious?"

"Hahah. That's not what I meant," Utsurigi said, and I could not tell whether he understood what I was thinking as I thought. "I am inordinately pleased that I can epigraph words from the former *Cluster* member *Double Flip* here. There is no more pleasing fun than speaking of a friend you are proud of."

"....."

Double Flip.

Or as Kunagisa calls him, *Hii-chan*.

"What words?"

"His words with regards to girls. *Let's say that there's a dog. I would not kick that dog. I would not crush its head with a brick. If that dog is starving, and I have bread in my hand, I would give it to that dog. If it wags its tail and walks to my side, I would pet its head, and if it turns on its back, I would tickle its stomach. If it comes to it, I would let it roam my room and take care of it. I would forgive it if it bit my arm. However, despite that, I do not wish to be collared to that dog.*"

"... You have quite a downer of a friend, Utsurigi-san," I gave my honest opinion. "It is not right to compare a lady to a dog."

"Hahah. *Cheetah* said the same. And then *Double Flip* answered, *Oh, then you must be looking down on dogs as a lower lifeform than humans. Hmm, so you're fundamentally discriminatory. Hahah, a hypocrite. My, my, what a pitiable man. You should just die. Not that you have any purpose to being alive, anyways. An existence where your life simply causes other people trouble, and only when you die do others relax and feel at ease. Only being useful to others by being dead, in fact that's even worse than a dog. I see, I thought you were a cheetah but you're just a dog. That's funny. Hey, dog, then will you look for something, for me? It's about a bone.* Incidentally, after that they had a wrestling match."

"... Sounds fun."

It was a story that was hard to comment on, so I absentmindedly responded.

"Not that we have the ability to feel the emotion called fun. Now, if Kunagisa Tomo is not a sister to you, then how about a pet?"

"....."

"Truth be told, she's as loyal as a dog, isn't she? **To you, anyways.**"

Those words sounded like they had more meaning. As if he had the confidence such that he has a hidden wildcard up his sleeve for me. It did not seem like a mere bluff.

"Realistically, I think *Dead Blue* is a very convenient thing for you. After all, she's a direct descendant of the Kunagisa blood. A child of a family that can fund a laboratory of this magnitude deep inside the mountains, that can fund someone like that *Mad Demon*. Even though she's disowned, her influence is still enormous. After all, there is the matter of her sibling, Kunagisa Nao, and plenty of others within the family that still offer her their help. Just by being by her, you could say that your life is insured."

”.....”

“And as for her, she has blue hair, and despite her age, she still boasts a young body, and no matter how bizarre she is and how many other quirks she has, she’s quite a cute girl. Cute, cute girl, enough to **turn one on**. Being able to do as one wants with her, being able to do as one desires, is a seductive tale for any boy.”

“However, that does not sound very pleasant,” I interrupted Utsurigi. “Do I look like that type of person?”

”..... Heheh. Even a boy like you can grow angry,” Utsurigi’s expression seemed to say, *gotcha*. “Was it because you were insulted? Or was it because your feelings toward Kunagisa Tomo were insulted? Or perhaps because I was spot on?”

“I am not particularly angry. All I said was that it was not a very pleasant tale.”

“Was it. I feel pleasant. Beyond pleasant. Because I am talking about a friend, with a friend of that friend, and there is nothing more mirthful than this. ... How well can you handle computer media?”

“Not that well,” I felt suspicious as the topic suddenly changed as I answered. “I took an electrical engineering class or something, though.”

“Ahh. *Verge* did say something like that. That you were part of the ER3 system, that massive think tank,” Utsurigi nodded to himself in understanding. “I see, I see. That makes sense; you’re smarter than you look, then.”

“You heard about me from Kunagisa?”

“Yeah. Do you want to know what she said? Do you want to know what lines of expression were spoken by Kunagisa Tomo?”

“No. I am fine.”

Utsurigi smiled, as if he understood something about me given my immediate response. It was an unpleasant smile.

”... Computers are by far the most most most excellent of devices developed by humans. That can be said not for the hardware, but mostly for the software. They can follow intricate programs using rules that cannot normally be understood, and at a super high speed. They make anything possible, act in a grand language differing from humans, and can arrive at a result that took humans a hundred years in five minutes. Yet on the other hand, despite being such an inexplicable, unbelievable device,

even an ordinary person can control it. Switch a button, and the computer stops. There are some that say that's why computers were able to prosper among people. Controlling a computer satisfies the inner craving of *having dragged something greater than oneself to their own level*."

"..... I,"

"No matter who, people want to always be the one in command. Now, having taken a glimpse into the dirty desires of mankind, let's bring the subject back to Kunagisa Tomo. She's without a doubt a *genius*. We first bring up her memory, which makes one wonder if she has a ridiculous number of disc farms loaded into her. It's the maximum amount of RAM possible for a human being. And, there does not exist a single person who has seen a program she's written and not been mesmerized. Beauty means the lack of pointless pointlessness. It means there's no surplus or excess. Programs written by *Dead Blue* have no wastefulness whatsoever. Not just her programs, the hardware she produces as an engineer, the motherboards and CPU have no wastefulness, either. *Dead Blue* was on a different dimension even in *Cluster* when it came to *not being wasteful*."

"....."

"Do you know what *Dead Blue* was called when she was young? Of course you know, you wouldn't not know. She was called by a single word: savant. Obviously one doesn't need to borrow a French word to express it, for whether you call her the English word genius, or the Japanese word tensai, or call her by a German word or a Chinese word or a Swahili word, the meaning doesn't change. Because there're no national borders to talent. Back when I was still a lonely hacker, when I still dreamed that I was someone lonely, I heard a rumor that a direct descendant of the Kunagisa house held within her such a Godline talent, and so I waged a war[4)] on her."

"War....."

"War, war, war. We're not very fond of one another, but don't we all share the same feelings? Some feel jealousy, some feel worship, as every person takes a gander at her. Of course, even I wanted to get in contact with Kunagisa Tomo – though at the time my thought was more *must contact the enemy* – and so I tried many means, but as you'd expect of the Kunagisa Syndicate, they didn't make things easy. I had to give up. That's why when she formed *Cluster* and contacted me from her end – I cried with

joy. I'm not exaggerating, I really cried. Laugh if you want to laugh, that an adult past the age of thirty, had been saved by a girl of fourteen."

"……."

Of course, I could not laugh.

It was not something that one could laugh at.

"No, I honestly think it's a sham. A terribly comical sham. Think about it. The Greatest Brains in the World – heheh, embarrasses me to say that myself, but nine of the Greatest Brains in the World gathered, and what they did would simply be the playthings of a younger child. It feels like an extreme waste of talent, misuse of talent. Frankly – if all of us used our talents in a more **proper** direction – we could become like guardians of justice, could make this planet a much more fantastic star. Hey, don't you think I'm exaggerating?"

"– I do not. As you say, if all of you had been virtuous, saving the world would have been as easy as baking apple pie. But, that's an impossible premise. In the end, that is part of what makes a genius. The nine of you from *Cluster* – the nine including Kunagisa, were not outliers. The people in this research facility are probably the same, and even the geniuses I have encountered throughout my life, each one had their own abnormal quirks. And by abnormal I do not just mean *from the perspective of society*. Everyone – was jarred somewhere. A humane genius would be the one that is the outlier. I am not as romantic as a dreamy girl to expect humaneness from people with talent."

"Is that discrimination toward dreamy girls?"

"How do we get there? At the very least, I prefer dreamy girls over dreamy middle-aged men."

"Are you talking about me? However it's just as you say. Most geniuses have some anti-social aspects. Or rather, society has always been unkind to people with talents. Few harbor pleasant feelings toward geniuses who can swipe away all of your value in a single instant."

"… Please cut it out, Utsurigi-san," I finally became unable to restrain myself as I spoke. "If you want to say something, how about you just spit it out? There is a limit to how roundabout you can be. Your conversation is merely drawing it out. Not that Goethe said this, but really, if you were a novel, I would have stopped reading here."

"Well that's a shame. This is where it gets fun."

"I cannot imagine so."

"Reading a book that you feel is boring to the end without slamming it against the wall calls for courage – or so it was said. According to Dazai Osamu. Lonesome geniuses always say good things. Don't you agree?"

"..... Then, shall I draw out my own courage, and have some level of expectations?"

"Yeah, have expectations. I'll take you up on that, in the name of *Green Green Green*. ..... However, genius – a good word, but one that I can't help but feel is far too widespread nowadays. Think about it, it's not that hard or rare to be called a genius. Do you think any person in this laboratory has never been called a genius at least once in their life? Even Shito-kun and Misachi-san. Although I don't know about you, who came as an associate of *Dead Blue*, and your guardian Suzunashi-san, but it's not that significant to be called a genius. What's tough – is to be aware yourself that you're a genius. And obviously I don't mean in a delusional way."

"What's the difference between awareness and delusion?"

"Who knows, there might not be a difference at all. At the very least, if you or I were to decide, nothing might change. But, even you know the difference between predicting and knowing, right? You predict that a six will show, and roll a die. Six shows. Hey, does this mean the person who predicted it is talented? No. But if they knew a six would show, it's different. There's no doubt about it – truly no doubt about it, that such a person is a genius. Back in the day, there was a past where I predicted that I was a genius. But it was a delusion. Thinking back on it makes me embarrassed, actually. But when you go there – Kunagisa Tomo, she's terribly self-aware, don't you think? Don't you think she has a firm grasp on her own genius?"

"A comparison not quite like you, Utsurigi-san. The relation is also overused. I acknowledge that she is a genius, but–"

"You acknowledge, and I acknowledge. However, the one who acknowledges it the most is Kunagisa Tomo herself. Self-consciousness and self-awareness are both related to self-confidence in any living species, but you don't need me to explain that theory, right? If you want the evaluations by other people, you would need the talent to see through the senses of others. However, in order to achieve absolute valuation, you need to know yourself above all. Not to become self-aware through the

comparisons of those around you, but to acknowledge yourself through yourself alone. You don't test yourself, as testing is unnecessary and testing is never done. You don't require the world to live, and that's the identity of absolute genius, awareness."

"....."

"Now, she's that sort of *White Out (Genius)*, but on the other hand, **everything else** is terrible. Kunagisa Tomo boasts unparalleled abilities in tinkering with machines and constructing applications, but she's completely ignorant about everything else. There're disabilities for extreme imbalances in talent, like the famous Idiot Savant Syndrome and more recently Asperger's Syndrome, but her case is like another step above the normal syndromes. Her infantile manner of speech, her disconnected thought process. She displays a spectacular level of failure at anything related to people. Well of course, after all, she's lacking *emotions*. Maybe lacking is too strong, but she's certainly not got enough of them. Perhaps she does have enough, but she doesn't know how to control them, at all. As such, she can't read other peoples' emotions. Human relations, in the end, are simply like looking in a mirror. It only works out because people assume that the other person is thinking the same way they do. You can't communicate with someone that doesn't appear in the mirror. Well, not that I'm allowed to say something like this, but... forgive me. Anyways, that's why that *genius* Kunagisa Tomo ends up not being able to live alone. Because she's so out-there, she cannot live alone. Yet because she's so out-there, she must live alone. Hahah, what an amusing psychological (paradox)," said Utsurigi as he pointed at me. "..... If something like you didn't exist, Kunagisa Tomo wouldn't even be able to keep living. Leaving aside whether that role must be performed by you, for Kunagisa Tomo to continue living, she must rely on you for living processes. If we think of Kunagisa Tomo as a computer, then she's just the terribly fundamental mechanism prior to the loading of an operating system. Now, a question. How do you feel, with a genius under your care?"

"..... You ask a bit too many questions, Utsurigi-san," I said while looking upward. "If you have any manners, you should only ask one question per turn, or at most two."

"Perhaps. Perhaps it's as you say, but perhaps you can also give me that little bit of service, can't you? Servitude without seeking gratitude is the

adhesive to human relations, you know. Answer me. How do you feel, **owning** Kunagisa Tomo?"

"Do you want me to say *she's mine, and I'm not giving her to anyone else*?" I slowly, gradually raised my head, and glared at Utsurigi. "What a joke. If you want her, you can go ahead and take her."

"....."

"You cannot speak for me. Because I cannot speak for myself, either."

"Hmmhmm. You mean that you won't speak for yourself, not that you can't speak for yourself. On your own accord, anyways," Utsurigi did not back off at all. "You're overcome with fear at what you might need to speak for yourself about, aren't you? You're afraid of what would result if you were to corner yourself. You're afraid of fear. You can't help fearing yourself. Isn't that right?"

"Perhaps. But, so what? There is no right for you to talk ill about me. Even if you did, I would not stand for it. Kunagisa is a friend to me. I am a friend to Kunagisa. Is that not enough?"

"For now, sure. For now, that's fine," Utsurigi nodded. "For now, that might be fine. But you... eventually, you'll run into a wall. Because such a vague, indefinite relationship can't last forever. If you run into a wall and realize it, that's fine, but if you run into a wall and die, that's that. Do you realize that, right now? It just looks to me like you're averting your eyes. Turn end. Now, I shall accept a question from you."

Utsurigi leaned back in his steel-pipe chair, bracing himself for my question. I wavered at what to ask next. No, it was already determined what I wanted to ask next. I hesitated at whether I should ask that or not. However, in the end, I said it.

"....., Utsurigi-san. About *Team*... about *Cluster*."

"Call it whatever you want. That's just a proxy name, anyways."

"..... Why was **something like that** formed in the first place?"

I said.

"What and how were you thinking, to organize something like *Team*... like *Cluster*, and then act?"

"..... So that's your core."

The look in Utsurigi's eyes changed. Those Cheshire-like eyes that outwardly seemed to be smiling seemed to flip around completely, as his

eyes turned into an obvious look of someone shooting, digging through me.

"Easy. It's several tens and hundreds times easier for me to answer your question than it would be to twist the wrist of a baby. Truly simple, one sentence. ..... However, to be honest, I don't feel it."

".....? What do you mean?"

"In other words, if you think me as being honest, then it would betray your hopes. Unfortunately, I don't carry an answer that would live up to your expectations. In this case, *Double Flip* might have been able to pull something off, but I can't do that."

"....."

"Do you still want it?"

Utsurigi combed upwards through his white hair. And then he took off his sunglasses, placed them in a pocket on his lab coat, and then looked at me with his naked eyes.

"If you want to hear, I'll answer. But that wouldn't be an answer out of kindness. Rather, you should understand that it would be a malicious answer from **us**, those you **took** Kunagisa Tomo from. Even then, even then do you want it?"

"I want to hear it."

I, with nary an instant, not even a moment of wavering, nodded. This indecisive, half-assed me, nodded without any hesitation.

"Please tell me, Utsurigi-san."

"Because *Dead Blue* sought it."

Utsurigi did in fact answer it with one sentence. He answered so simply.

"All we did was **abide**. That was her word, and we followed. She was not just our leader. She was our Kaiser. And we were *Dead Blue*'s pawns as well as her slaves."

"Urgh–"

I slumped forth.

My knees felt like they were collapsing. My legs alone were no longer able to support my weight, and I grasped at the wall. However, even that was not enough, and I had to press my hands against the wall. It felt like the wall was going to fall down on me. No, I was just on the verge of falling over. However, something needed to be done, for it felt like my existence was about to end.

”– tsurigi–”

I. I. I. I. I.

And, as I tried to formulate words.

“Hey! How long are you going to be talking to Utsurigi-san!”

I heard Shito-kun’s yelling along with frantic knocking from the other side of the door.

“Seriously! What’re you doing!?”

“Heheh.....” Utsurigi shrugged his shoulders at the voice and changed his seated posture. He took the sunglasses out of his lab coat and put them back on. His eyes returned to being that fake smile.

“Alright, Shito-kun! We’re done talking! ..... Hahah, I guess that’s all for now. I still had questions, but let’s leave it be. **Mr. Friend of Kunagisa**.”

”..... It seems so,” I put all of my strength into my legs and pushed my body from the wall. “It seems so, Mr. *Green Green Green*.”

“Heheh. Tomorrow, come again. Let’s have a more constructive talk then. You’ll be staying here one or two more days, anyways, right?”

“Yes, well, probably.....”

“Bring that guardian lady of yours, Suzunashi, tomorrow. From the way *Verge* put it, she seems like an interesting woman to talk to. Wouldn’t take a backseat to you.”

“She will punch you if you say any sexual harassment.”

“I honorably appreciate your kind-hearted worry,” Utsurigi laughed unperturbed by my sarcasm. “But don’t worry. My body’s quite firm. I’ll be fine being punched. Heheh, well, give everyone my regards.”

“Everyone...?” I tilted my head to the side. “Who?”

“Everyone. Shito-kun, the professor, Misachi-san and other fellows. You seem to have met Koutari-san and Neo-san.”

“Yes. The long-haired one and the round one.”

Yes, yes, Utsurigi nodded.

“Neo-san’s roundness can no longer be helped – roundness is his trait – but Koutari-san’s long hair would make his eyes go bad. Make sure to warn him about that, if you would.”

Understood, I said, and then I went to open the door, “I will be going, then.” But then Utsurigi called out to me again, “wait a second.” I asked, “What is it?” without turning around. My right hand was already gripping the doorknob. Shito-kun was on the other side of this door, and Kunagisa

would be nearby. Kunagisa. The Kunagisa Tomo I know was on the other side of this door.

“Last question, Mr. Friend of Kunagisa.”

”..... That is odd,” I did not turn around. “Utsurigi-san started the questions, so it would be unfair for Utsurigi-san to ask the last question.”

“Then the next turn will start from you, would that suit you? And this would just be a one-sentence answer, the same as the question you asked me. A simple question. It won’t take your time.”

“Huh... well, I do not mind. What is it?”

Utsurigi did not answer immediately, and after a few moments, he spoke.

“You–”

He asked toward me.

”—- You–”

He carefully carved into my brain.

“You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don’t you?”

2

Some tens of minutes later – Kunagisa and I, once again, were in Professor Shadou Kyouichirou's First Ward. Kunagisa and I were sitting side-by-side in the same fourth-floor room that was Professor Kyouichirou's visitor room. Professor Kyouichirou was apparently currently in a third-floor laboratory room, and Shito-kun had gone there to report to him that *Kunagisa and Utsurigi's meeting had finished*.

As such, I was alone with Kunagisa.

Alone with.

With.

..... However, was that really the case?

Perhaps it was simply such that one and one were in this room, and not that two were with each other?

".....? Ii-chan?"

Eventually, Kunagisa peered in at me from the side. From below, she looked at me with her large eyes.

"Hey, Ii-chan. You haven't said anything in a while, what happened?"

"..... Hm?" I raised my head. "Huh? I was not saying anything? That is weird. I thought I was passionately theorizing about the religious conflicts and the dominance of the nobility in Medieval Europe."

"You weren't."

"No, I was."

"You were not."

"I was theorizing!" I could no longer back down. "As a descendant of Napoleon, I am obligated to think seriously about these things. As someone who will eventually reign over all of Europe, I must have a firm grasp of the past history of the land."

"Ii-chan, did Sacchan say something mean to you?"

She ignored me.

Kunagisa seemed just a tad anxious, and continued speaking as if she were worried about me.

“Sacchan isn’t supposed to say that to anyone he doesn’t care about, though. But I can’t think of why Sacchan would fixate on Ii-chan.”

”..... No, he did not say anything to me in particular. Nothing, in particular. He just asked about what has been happening around you of late,” I answered, feigning normalcy. “Maybe he wanted to know about your surroundings from a different perspective? Anyways, nothing was said to me.”

“Mmhmm...”

Kunagisa did not seem appeased, however, in any case, she nodded.

I leaned all the way back in the seat and stared up at the ceiling. The fan was going round and round, circulating the air in the room. While gazing at that meaninglessness, while gazing for whatever reason at the current of invisible air, I slowly exhaled, and tried changing the flow of air just a little.

Of course, this action led to nothing.

There was no meaning.

”.....”

I was once asked.

Do you love my sister?

I was once questioned.

Do you like Kunagisa-chan?

To both, I answered almost immediately, *of course not*. Twice of twice, two times of two times, I answered thus. A third would likely result the same, and even a fourth. The fifth would be the same, and no doubt the sixth as well.

Almost immediately, I would shake my head.

That was all.

However–

You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don’t you?

I, to that question from Utsurigi, forgot almost immediately; finally, I was unable to answer. I could not answer.

”..... Why.”

Why was I unable to answer that question, that simple question, that question that could be answered with one phrase?

There was no need to be truthful. There was no need to be honest. Because there was no need to be truthful or honest to that man. All I

needed to do was let the topic pass, even if I needed to lie, and continue onward as ever.

As I did to her in May.

All I needed to do was use nonsense.

Why.....

"Scum..... how pathetic. There is a limit to how humiliating one can be. No, not humiliating, in this case it would be a lack of self-comprehension... what is this scum doing?"

Should just die.

Why are you alive?

"..... This is too pitiful....."

"Hmm? Didja say something this time? Ii-chan," Kunagisa tilted her head to the side. "I couldn't hear you."

"..... No, I was talking to myself. I am half-made of talking to myself, after all. However, no no, regardless," I forced myself to sound energetic. "I do not want to sound like Suzunashi-san, but he was surprisingly normal, Utsurigi. I was imagining someone more incomprehensible like you or Chii-kun."

Comprehensible.

Normally, this should be an advantage for me. However... as should be expected of the destructive specialist in *Team*, that *Green Green Green*. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, astounding.

To be able to destroy even nonsense.

"Normal... wouldn't be the way I'd put Sacchan," Kunagisa said in a rare show of hesitation. "Well, I can't really explain it well. Still, what a pain."

"Pain, what?"

"Ii-chan heard too, anyways, right? Sacchan doesn't wanna get out of here."

"Ahh... that. Yes, he said that." Not even just not wanting to leave, he seemed to have no interest at all in the matter, and seemed to be more interested in my relationship with Kunagisa. "You didn't persuade him?"

"I did. I did, but, I did, but. Persuade – that's a pretty empty refrain in front of Sacchan. Sacchan wouldn't stop for something I say. Utsurigi Gaisuke has no red[5)] – he's green[6)], green[7)], green[8)]."

"Would not stop for something you say... are you not his leader?"

“Ex, leader. But you know, even though we were *Team*, everyone did what they wanted... it’s pretty surprising we actually managed to stick together. That’s why it’s not so much that *Team* disbanded so much as it just collapsed. When talent surpasses a certain threshold it becomes too much to handle – that’s an exhausting episode I’d rather not remember, though.”

“Considering what you told me about Chii-kun, that is probably true...”

“Mmm. What a pain, what a pain. Boku-sama-chan’s going through too much pain. It’s like a battle royale of pains in the butt. Am I really supposed to be thinking this is such a pain?”

Just as Kunagisa folded her arms in a formal way, the door opened inward, and Professor Kyouichirou and Misachi-san filed into the room. This was the first time I had seen the Professor up close, and he did not have an imposing figure, and was more akin to a small old man. He was even using what looked like a wooden cane from a bygone age. However, you could tell from the way his body was here and there that when he was young, he must have boasted quite the build.

Professor Kyouichirou took one glance at Kunagisa and I, and seemed to blatantly smirk and laugh.

“How was it?” he said with a hoarse voice. “Your nostalgic re-encounter with your friend, it went well I assume, Lady of Kunagisa.”

“Yup. It was very much so, fun,” Kunagisa answered with a smile. “It was so fun it was like a dream. It was worth coming here for it. He said let’s talk tomorrow, too.”

“Is that so, is that so. That’s great,” the professor said, satisfied.

“But I would prefer that you leave that at a level that won’t interfere with work, Lady of Kunagisa. We aren’t just twiddling our thumbs with boredom this deep in the mountains, after all. Unlike you, we aren’t in a state of *having time and money to spare*.”

“Money aside, I feel like I told you before that I don’t really have that much time. Well anyways, I feel like I’ve figured as much on that topic,” Kunagisa said. “I’ve figured as much and I’m still doing this, so there it’s pointless to try to act like I’m not. More importantly, Professor. I’d like to get into business soon, do you have the time and tolerance to have a discussion?”

“Tolerance? Of course, I always have tolerance when it comes to young people.”

So Professor Kyouichirou said as he moved, with a calm pace, to take a rather questionable position right in front of Kunagisa Tomo, pausing in a way that it looked like he was looking down at the seated Kunagisa.

“However – that guardian of yours, she’s not here. Are you alright with just that unreliable-looking boy by your side? Lady of Kunagisa.”

“I appreciate your worry, but I’d rather not partake in a pointless conversation, Professor. You actually know, don’t you? What sort of person Ii-chan is.”

”.....”

Professor Kyouichirou clicked his tongue in a blatantly irritated manner, turned to Misachi-san, and said,

“Hey. Leave.”

“What? But, Professor–”

“I’ll not stand talking back. To be more clear, I’m saying, *disappear*.”

”.....”

“Want me to be more clear?”

”– No, I understood.”

Misachi-san did not speak back, as told, and simply bowed once and then shuffled out of the room without even her footsteps being audible. She had the talent to be a maid, and so I felt Shito-kun’s invention was quite a sin, but perhaps this is simply a case of a wrong situation.

Talent – I did not want to sound like Kunagisa from earlier, but it is rare for a word to be such an empty refrain in this research facility. With two such geniuses so close by, is there any meaning to the word talent? So much for some things being forever.

Kunagisa giggled and laughed.

“As always, you don’t think of people as people, Professor. Why such a Professor would dip their hand into artificial intelligence is something I absolutely cannot comprehend.”

“Cannot comprehend? I would never have imagined the Lady of Kunagisa saying something like that.”

”.....”

“Hmph. What an extremely unpleasant child, you,” the Professor said with a venomous tone, stepping away from Kunagisa. “That face, those

eyes, those lips, that silhouette, that body, that smile, that speech, everything is bothersome."

"Hey, Professor....." I could not resist butting in. "Such words should not be spoken by a gentleman."

"By a gentleman? You're a shallow brat to be expecting something like that from this *Mad Demon*," the Professor laughed. "And, this isn't particularly rude. This Lady of Kunagisa wouldn't be hurt by my words. She doesn't think anything of me from the start. Isn't that right? Lady of Kunagisa."

"That's a mean way of looking at it, Professor. You don't have to look at it with such a twisted mindset, do you?"

"But it's the truth. You're, you know? Only looking at Utsurigi Gaisuke, aren't you? Yes, in actuality you're not looking at me at all, and have no intention of looking at me," the Professor continued. "Do you remember – well, that's a dumb question. Seven years ago, when I had a laboratory in Hokkaido, that day when you and your brother Kunagisa Nao both visited."

"....."

"At the very least, I can't forget that day. Hey, brat," the Professor turned the conversation toward me. "This Lady, this Lady who was 12 years old at the time, when she saw the fruits of thirty years of my research, what do you think she said?"

"... I do not know. I cannot even imagine."

"*This is actually amazing research*," Kunagisa interceded. "*If I didn't take this seriously it'd take me three hours* – is what I said."

"....."

I could imagine that scene clearly. She would smile, just like she did at me six years ago, and with an ordinary, very ordinary tone, say that line. Without any malice, without meaning any ill, without meaning to hurt nor humiliate others, without imagining that the Professor would have taken thirty years.

Unconcernedly crushed–

Professor Kyouichirou under her shoes.

"It's not my fault. Nao-kun didn't tell me that the Professor would have consumed his entire life on something like that. So cruel, Nao-kun. Don't you think so, Ii-chan?"

“Hmph. That **brat** is also most unpleasant,” the Professor spat, against even a person heading the organization backing him. “Indeed – you siblings both trampled over me. I still see that day in my dreams.”

I looked at Kunagisa and whispered, ”– Incidentally, what did Nao-san say?” Kunagisa groaned, “Ummm.”

”*Do not fret, Professor. You should continue your research without paying any heed to my sister.*”

She imitated Nao-san’s speech mannerisms.

“That sounds normal.”

“It’s normal, right? I wonder what was wrong,” Kunagisa tilted her head to the side. “Maybe it’s because he said afterwards, *after all, we cannot allow my esteemed sister, a direct descendant of the Kunagisa bloodline, to perform such menial labor*?”

“Doubtlessly.”

I did not have any intention of supporting Professor Kyouichirou, but one would obviously not feel great about having their own field trashed by such an absurd pair of siblings.

“But that’s a long time ago, Professor,” Kunagisa turned to back to the Professor. “And that was said by a kid. You shouldn’t dwell on it so much.”

“Whether a child or a girl, it’s still talent. Lady of Kunagisa. Isn’t that right?”

”..... You know. It’s not like I came here to reminisce. I don’t think I’m taking the Professor lightly, but in that case, Professor, why can’t we have a conversation more like what you’d expect from two people with academic history? The Professor’s attitude isn’t really an attitude of someone who’s willing to talk.”

“That goes for you as well, do you actually want to talk? Lady of Kunagisa. No matter what happens, the Lady wants to abduct that Utsurigi from me, don’t you?”

“Abduct is a vicious word to use here.”

“But what the Lady of Kunagisa wants to do is exactly that. You want to take away one of my fellows in this laboratory.”

”.....”

“I won’t give him to you.”

The Professor said, bluntly.

“No matter what happens – even if the Lady of Kunagisa is on the other end, I have no intention of letting go of Utsurigi Gaisuke. I have not the slightest intent to discuss this. My opinion won’t change – and Utsurigi Gaisuke’s opinion won’t change.”

”– And that’s the thing.”

Kunagisa lightly shrugged her shoulders.

“That’s the thing. Sacchan – he’s not the type to bend his own will. Even back when he was part of *Team*, **restraining** Sacchan was the toughest. I could control him but I couldn’t restrain him, and that’s why he’s *Green Green Green*. Sacchan was the only one I thought I might not be able to handle within *Team*. To be able to control that Sacchan at your will, Professor, what are you doing?”

“Nah. He and I just think the same, that’s all. Our topics of research matched, so we decided to work together.”

It was an obvious lie. That was clear, given the conversation with Utsurigi earlier. But at least on the surface, that was their explanation for this situation.

”..... It’d be nice if we’d be able to have a bit more of a... human-like conversation, I had some sort of hopes like that. Maybe that was just my hopes coloring reality, though.”

“Human-like, eh,” the Professor said with a sarcastic tone. ”..... However, a human-like conversation, that would be done with a human, wouldn’t it? –**Miss Monster**.”

“Ii-chan!”

Kunagisa yelled.

Not at Professor Kyouichirou, but at me.

At me, who had begun to stand from my chair.

“Don’t move. You can’t move.”

”.....”

“What’s the point of rampaging here? I’m talking, right now.”

”.....”

“Ii-chan.”

”..... Ok.”

”.....”

“I said ok.”

”.....”

“I said ok. I get it.”

I sat back down, and opened my balled fist. I tried glaring at the Professor to make myself feel better, but the Professor did not seem to mind my look at all, and simply snorted, “Hmph.”

“I see. As the Lady of Kunagisa said, he doesn’t seem to be just a wussy brat.”

”..... I guess.”

“Hey, Brat. You seem to have been outraged by my not treating the Lady of Kunagisa as a human, but you’re also not treating her as a human. Brat, do you understand? How it feels to be an old man being looked down upon by this little girl?”

“Of course I would not,” I answered, annoyed. This was a different sort of unpleasantness than speaking to Utsurigi. “I do not want to hear from someone older such prepubescent words.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t, at all. What sort of talent is beside you, you wouldn’t even have a clue.”

”.....”

“Hey, brat. To be honest, I’m a bit envious of you,” the Professor said, pulling just a hair of enmity from his voice. “No, envy is probably a bit different. Yes – from my perspective, you’re doing something astonishing without any trouble. The astonishing act of being beside Kunagisa Tomo.”

”..... Astonishing act.”

“It’s an astonishing act, you can be proud of it. Even I am a single person before I am the *Mad Demon*, and I pride myself on being able to see talent within people. I’ll also acknowledge that that little girl is on a different dimension of genius, and that she harbors brilliant talent that humiliates this Shadou Kyouichirou, who was once also called the same. – But even so, to want to be by that side, such a thought doesn’t even come close to crossing my mind.”

”.....”

“I wouldn’t be able to tolerate it. Wouldn’t be able to tolerate it. I would rather die than be by the side of that monster.”

”..... Will you please.”

“I won’t let you say you don’t feel any inferiority toward the Lady of Kunagisa, brat,” Professor Kyouichirou said. “Given how you reacted

earlier, you're not some insensitive idiot who can live without feeling anything about Kunagisa Tomo."

"You say something similar to Utsurigi-san."

Although their opinions went in completely opposite directions.

Green Green Green worshipped *Dead Blue* as a god.

Mad Demon feared the *Blue Savant* as a monster.

However, all that meant was that their directions were on opposite vectors, because what they meant was the exact same. As they both defined me an idiot beyond saving, they were the exact same.

However.

"Really, I am getting tired of that type of wording. I dislike stereotyping. You are all like broken records, pitiful. That desire to fit people into your own sets of measurements–"

"Professor."

Kunagisa interrupted me. Butting into someone speaking is a rarity for Kunagisa. And to top it off, she was interrupting me.

"Professor. Let's drop it, that sort of thing. Talent, genius, I don't care for that impertinence. I'm through with painstaking stuff like a discussion of ideologies, the debate of ideologies. Let's leave that sort of theorizing to liberal arts philosophers, science professor. To be honest, I feel sorry for the Professor for not having aaaaaaaaany talent in your head, but stop blaming that on me. Kunagisa Tomo holds no responsibility for your incompetence."

"– Wha-"

The Professor's face flushed red at Kunagisa's extremely touchy words. I was surprised, too. This was the first time I had ever seen Kunagisa so blatantly provoke someone.

"Isn't that how it is? The reason you're locking Sacchan up here is because you can't do anything yourself, so you need to use Sacchan's power, right? How you placated, ensnared... blackmailed Sacchan I don't know, but that bragging of research that you did using other peoples' skills, could you stop that too, while we're at it? Actually, I don't even care about that. From the bottom of my heart all the way out, in any and every case, I don't care about you at all. What the Professor is proud of, what the Professor cries of, Kunagisa Tomo is responsible for absolutely nothing. So I'll just say one thing."

Kunagisa Tomo spoke.

"Give Sacchan back."

"....."

"**That belongs to me.**"

"....."

"**I place what belongs to me by my side.** At the very least, it's unpleasant to have him owned by the likes of you."

"..... That's your own opinion," the Professor barely managed to retort. He retorted to *Dead Blue*. "You threw that away. What's wrong with picking up what's on the ground?"

"Even things I've thrown away. **Even things I've thrown away are still without a doubt mine.** It's unpleasant to have something you've thrown away picked up. ... you know, Professor. *Dead Blue* is extremely greedy. Do you not even realize that much...?"

"..... I won't give that to you."

The Professor repeated.

"Even if you prostrate yourself, I refuse. That – is my one and only advantage over the Lady of Kunagisa. It's the one thing, even if it's just one, even if it's borrowed, that I am triumphant over you about. I can't let that go."

"– Boring. So it's just envy?"

"Envy – I can't help if that's how it looks to you, but don't take me too lightly. If you were to know what I'm doing now – this time, even the Lady of Kunagisa would be shocked."

"Mmhmm. I guess if you think of the cast here, it might be impossible to do it in three hours – after all, even Sacchan is here."

"..... This discussion is over."

The Professor distanced himself from Kunagisa and then sat in a nearby chair.

"Or more like, there's no room for discussion. Considering how radically opposite our standings are, there's no hope for compromise."

"There there, let's stop concluding things so quickly. Sorry, I might have gotten too emotional," Kunagisa smiled vibrantly, and showed Professor Kyouichirou both of her palms. "I apologize. The Professor seems to be really busy today, so tomorrow, let's talk again, more calmly. I have a bunch of gifts for you, too."

”..... Right. Tomorrow, again,” said the Professor, and the chuckled as if he just remembered something. ”..... I don’t know what sort of wild card you have up your sleeves, but I think it’ll be a futile effort. As the Lady of Kunagisa said – Utsurigi Gaisuke never bends his will. Regardless of whether that will was imposed or not.”

”..... Maybe.”

“The inn is deep in the woods. It might be a bit dirty for the Lady of Kunagisa, but tolerate it. After all, we’re deep in the mountains. Shito will guide you. Shito’s waiting in the lobby of the first floor, so go see him. Well, see you tomorrow – Lady of Kunagisa.”

So said Professor Kyouichirou, who then turned his entire chair away, as if to signify that there was nothing left to say.

”..... Yup, tomorrow.”

Kunagisa said, and then she stood from her seat and pulled my hand.

“Let’s go, Ii-chan. He said Shito-chan’s on the first floor.”

”..... Alright. Got it.”

I stood as directed, and let myself be pulled away out of the room, leaving Professor Kyouichirou.

Kunagisa Tomo and Shadou Kyouichirou.

Their relationship seemed so shallow, yet it was surprisingly dense. It was not *don’t care*. No, the dense relationship might just be from my perspective, or perhaps from Professor Kyouichirou’s perspective, and Kunagisa herself might really not care. And that utter lack of care was another gash in Professor Kyouichirou’s pride.

It was not that I could not understand.

Not that I wanted to understand anyways.

However, unfortunately – and not just for Shadou Kyouichirou but also for Kunagisa Tomo – their conversation was sliding right past each other. They were both clearly discussing, but they were discussing different topics. It could be compared to a competition between oil and water for the cup. There would be never be anything like compromise like that.

Youth and gender is also a type of talent–

There was certainly some significance to the words the Professor spoke.

”..... But, you know.”

Green Green Green, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Mad Demon, Shadou Kyouichirou.

Dead Blue, Kunagisa Tomo.

Outrageous – though if I were to be borrowing the Professor's choice of words, there are three outrageous monster-class geniuses stepping over each other.

To be honest, I did not understand what any of the three were saying. Perhaps this lack of care for understanding was what Professor Shadou Kyouichirou called *shallowness*. It must be. Being smart is itself an unfortunate thing. You end up seeing what you do not need to see. You end up hearing what you do not need to hear. You end up learning of tastes you do not need to know, and you end up smelling odors you do not need to smell. Well, that sounds alright if you intend to become a cook.

"……."

All smart people should become cooks.

Yes, this was a phrase that did not feel lacking compared to the words of that Professor Kyouichirou. I thought that while thinking of the cook on that island.

Then, as we walked down the hall – Uze Misachi-san was sitting in the smoking room.

"Ah, Misachi-san," Kunagisa called out first. "We finished speaking to the Professor. You should be able to go back now, I think?"

"– Well thanks."

Misachi-san pressed her half-smoked cigarette (eco-friendly) on the ash tray and stood up. And then she tried to walk past us without saying anything, but then she seemed to remember.

"Ah, about Suzunashi-san."

She began.

"I was guiding her around as told – but along the way, we ran into Professor Kasugai and Professor Miyoshi, and it seemed they meshed well. Right now they should be speaking in the smoking room of the second floor. They should still be there, I think, so if you are looking for them, please make your way there."

"Why, thank you."

Kunagisa said the same.

Misachi-san turned away again, but I called out to her again, "Misachi-san."

"Um, I have something I wish to ask, if it is alright with you."

”– What is it?”

“Why, what reason do you have for working here?”

”.....”

This was the same question I had asked Shito-kun. In the end, Shito-kun had answered *you wouldn’t understand* and pushed me away, but what would Misachi-san say–

“I prefer to have no opinion.”

Misachi-san said, clearly and bluntly.

”.....”

“If you do not have anything else, I shall take my leave.”

”..... Yes. Thank you for your time.”

Misachi-san turned back toward the Professor’s room without a smile and briskly walked away. She had no hesitation in her steps. Perhaps she had no intent of being friendly to visitors like us. Being the secretary of someone like the *Mad Demon* must come with its share of exhaustion. In that sense, I thought we may share similar thoughts, but given the conversation just now, it seemed that would not be the case.

“She said Neon-chan’s on the second floor, Ii-chan.”

”..... I see. Well, let us go.”

I tried to nod as carelessly as possible, went past the smoking room, and arrived at the elevator. I pressed the button to go down, and then entered.

“However..... tomorrow,” I could not handle the silence and ended up voicing my thoughts. “The way it seemed, no matter how much you two talk tomorrow or even the day after, unless that grandpa suddenly dies of old age, nothing would change.”

“Ahh... yup. That sounds about right. I’ve got some thoughts. I’ll explain once we get to the inn. Someone might be listening here, and I need to think about some things. More importantly, Ii-chan,” Kunagisa looked at me. “Can I hug you?”

”..... What is that?”

I forced myself to have a nonchalant attitude toward Kunagisa’s sudden behavior. “You have never asked such a thing before. You hugged me whenever you pleased, however you pleased.”

“Hmm. I just feel like that now.”

“I see. That love comedy feel.”

“Is what,” Kunagisa smiled innocently. “So, can I? Just inside the elevator then, please.”

“I do not mind. Recharging, right?”

“Yup,” Kunagisa said as she wrapped her arms around me.

And then she pressed her body against me, buried her face in my chest, and showed no signs of loosening her grip. Even so, Kunagisa’s slender arms did not trouble me.

Did not trouble me.

Did not trouble me.

”.....”

That was time for just Kunagisa and I, time that we had not had in a long time. It was irreplaceable time, such that I thought I would be willing to throw anything away for this.

”– Or perhaps, that is also nonsense.....”

I thought while being embraced by Kunagisa.

What did Kunagisa speak to Utsurigi about? What sort of conversation occurred between the reunion of the former *Team* members?

I did not know. I could not know.

I am not a genius, and Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke were geniuses who could comprehend each other. They were geniuses who had fallen far more than even that Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

However–

I could not even begin to imagine what Utsurigi and Kunagisa spoke about, but I remembered everything, not just the final question, about my conversation with Utsurigi. I remembered absolutely every bit of Utsurigi’s detestable, every surface and every angle being detestable, unpleasant-to-the-core questions.

The nonsense-killing questions.

”—.....”

The elevator stopped. We had arrived on the second floor. However, Kunagisa still did not seem to want to let go. I, too, said nothing, and did not move to peel Kunagisa off. Of course I would not. Of course I would not be able to.

The opened door closed, and for a while, we continued sharing time like that. Time for ourselves.

Kunagisa's hands at my back. Kunagisa's arms wrapped around my torso. Kunagisa's face pressed into my chest. The blue hair I could see by looking down.

And–

And, that small face, which wasted not one byte, had a surplus of not one bit, in constructing a circuit of complete beauty.

Utsurigi related it to having memory power of the ultimate RAM. However – and Utsurigi himself probably realizes – that that relation was slightly wrong.

Kunagisa Tomo, no, *Dead Blue* had within her brain circuits not RAM but ROM. That was why she would never forget anything she remembered, and was packed with information that could never be changed or overwritten, to become an endless ring of information. Parts and whole melded together equally in an endless collection.

It was not a power for remembering.

It was a power for not forgetting.

There were very few that related Kunagisa Tomo to *being like a computer*, but I do not know if they truly felt that. Perhaps they had said such a thing, yet in the back of their minds still thought *even so, she is still a human, too*–? There was no basis or logic to that – so that might just be my hopes coloring reality. Well, I hope so, because otherwise I would be too pathetic.

However, Utsurigi seemed to be sure. That Utsurigi Gaisuke, who relates Kunagisa Tomo to being a *device*, worships that as *Green Green Green*. And indeed that must truly be the case, I think. A mere user of nonsense like myself could not know whether that is the case, but it must truly be the case, I think.

As such – as such.

That was why Kunagisa Tomo would never forget.

She did not forget. She cannot forget.

How she was duped by me six years ago, how she was treated by me six years ago, how she ended up because of me six years ago – she cannot forget. Even if Kunagisa herself wants to forget, she cannot forget.

How sinful, how encompassed in penalties a human I am.

Will not forget.

Remembers.

And yet, she embraces me like this.

She forgives everything.

Like a mother toward an infant child.

Like an owner bitten by their dog.

Like a tolerant goddess.

She forgives everything.

”– Laughable.”

I mumbled in jest, without laughing at all.

Utsurigi asked if I intended to own Kunagisa Tomo.

Professor Kyouichirou asked of my feelings of being beside Kunagisa Tomo.

Of course I cannot answer such things. I do not own Kunagisa Tomo, and I have never been beside Kunagisa Tomo.

In the end, I am just like Green Green Green, just like Cheetah, just like Double Flip, just like the rest of *Team* – simply owned by Kunagisa Tomo.

I am the one being owned.

The way I was being owned was just different from Utsurigi and others. And the way I am owned is just more vicious than Utsurigi and others, that was all.

”—.....”

How can something owned walk alongside the owner?

“Yup. Recharging complete. Let’s go, Ii-chan.”

“Right.”

I answered, normally.

Answered, I think.

“It would be wrong to leave Shito-kun waiting for long.”

“I know, right? Ahahah,” Kunagisa pressed the *Open* button. “But Neon-chan said she might not be able to strike a conversation with the laboratory fellows, so I wonder why she’s talking to Kokoromi-chan?”

“Who knows,” I answered without care, as we stepped out of the box. “Maybe they stumbled on a rousing topic?”

3

"Well yah, call it the ER Program or what have ya, but it's still just a school, so there're still those tests at the end of the year, ya know, that ya gotta pass or else you're forced out, if ya get what I mean."

A bright, cheerful female voice.

"Mmhmm–," this was Suzunashi-san's follow. "Then of course, Inoji must have taken those tests, too."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. If ya wanna know what sorta tests they are, boy they're the worst. They've got a hundred problems gathered up from every subject, but ya only got sixty minutes. And ya need sixty points to pass. Ya might think that's easy just by hearing that passing grade, but those hundred problems, from problem one to problem one-hundred, each one's hard enough that they aren't taking just one minute per, ya know."

"Hahahah, I can see where this is going," Neo-san's flamboyant, exaggerating voice. "So basically it's that, in the allotted time frame, you must find and select *only the problems you can solve*? It must be a test for your *observation* and *decision-making* skills. Fufu, Japan would never think of such a thing; the ER Program lives up to its name."

"Yup yup, pretty much. In other words sixty points isn't the minimum. Actually ya might as well call it the *perfect grade*. There're problems in that hundred that ya absolutely can't solve, so it's set up so ya can't ever get a hundred."

"What an underhanded system," Suzune-san. "That said, some real mean teacher must have come up with that test."

"Yah pretty much. Putting out such an S-class difficulty test in a situation when failing means being forced out, I wouldn'ta thought of it, but there were a lot of nutty teachers there. Anyways, so, whatcha think that Monkey Talk [9)] did?"

"The norm would be that, that he scored perfect anyways," Neo-san. "Getting a perfect on a test that you're not supposed to get perfect. That boy seems the type to do something preposterous like that."

“No, zero sounds about right, too,” Suzunashi-san. “Including the intent to revolt against that teacher, stubbornly handing in a blank sheet of paper.”

“Fufu. Sounds good. And, Koutari-chan what do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Koutari-san answered briskly. “But if I were to imagine the punchline, he would pick that one problem that isn’t supposed to be answerable, answer that correctly, and mess up everything else, that’s the type of guy he seems to be.”

“Ufufufu. Nah, everyone. Y’all three gave me three different answers, and lookyhere, they’re all right!” the voice said proudly, and then there was the sound of a table being slapped. “Neo-san said it’s a *test of observation, decision-making skills*, but it’s also a test of insight. That boyfriend, like Koutari-chan guessed, answered just the hardest question – and left the remaining ninety-nine questions blank.”

”.....” ”.....” ”.....”

“Surprise surprise, that’s the *perfect grade* that the *test-making* teacher sought. They’d decided that they’d progress **the students able to answer the hardest question regardless of everything else**. Regardless of everything else – in other words there wasn’t any point in answering the other questions from the start. Ya can’t solve that one problem and not solve the others, basically. So ya know, all ya had to do was solve that one. He saw through all that, and instead of wasting effort, spend all sixty minutes on just that one problem.”

Attaining the maximum result using the least effort–

That was the solution sought.

“I see. Quite a roundabout problem. That does sound much simpler than finding sixty problems that can be answered. As such, Koutari-san and I both had correct answers – although insight can’t be replicated without an incredible amount of conviction. *Solve the problem by imagining yourself in the maker’s shoes* I suppose is the fundamental thought. My, my, quite the boy, isn’t he,” Neo-san. ”– however, this beautiful lady’s answer hasn’t been accounted for, has it not?”

“Yah. And that’s why that Monkey Talk is so tough to handle,” and with a brief pause. ”– that single answer that was turned in with so much confidence, was wrong.”

And then she burst out laughing alone.

Has not changed. Has not changed. Has not changed in the least. Has not changed in the least bit in any which way. Since that time she teased me down under during my stay at the ER Program, Miyoshi Kokoromi-san – or rather, Miyoshi-sensei has not changed at all.

"Well, in the end, they recognized his insight, at least, so he passed – not one other pulled off that craziness, ya know –"

"– Kokoromi-sensei."

I realized that left alone she would say things better left unsaid, so I stepped out of the shadows of the hallway and into the smoking room, showing myself. In the smoking room was the tall, all-black Suzunashi Neon-san on the far right, the enormous body of Neo Futuara-san on the far left, in front of him Koutari Hinayoshi-san whose long-black hair obscured half of his body, and to the right and front – to the right and front was Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei.

Short, blond hair, and glasses that make you wonder if the lenses are a tad too big. She had an oversized white labcoat draped over her back without her arms through its sleeves, and she was so small that it would be pointless to compare her to Suzunashi-san. Her appearance was such that one might imagine a girl around middle-school age acting like a doctor. Though, she probably would not have been **acting** such when she was in middle school. Because in elementary school she had already gotten the credentials to be a professor in biological dissection.

Miyoshi Kokoromi.

Her name was Kokoromi [10)] but her expertise (and her joy and her hobby) was the exact opposite, as she specialized in completely dissecting biological forms and breaking them down and searching. She is so skilled at her craft that she was a teacher at the extremely large research organization, the ER3 System Project Program Department. And now, in the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou research facility, she was granted the third ward, and was the Number Two of this organization.

And – and, she used to be my instructor.

Of course, everyone who has taught you would fall under the category of instructor.

"–Heheh."

Kokoromi-sensei grinned like a mischievous brat, completely un-befitting of her age of twenty-seven. No, it has been three years since then,

so she must be past thirty. However, her face, which lacked any trace of cosmetics, looked only like it belonged to a girl.

"Yo, Monkey Talk. An unexpected reunion," Kokoromi-sensei flashed me a peace sign. "What now what now, ya got an odd look like ya've seen *Fueru Wakame-kun* [11] for the first time in yer life. How ya doing? Have ya been good since? My student."

"At the very least, until just now, I was doing much better than I feel now. Yes – truly, an unexpected reunion, my instructor," I answered, feeling my eyes naturally escaping from Kokoromi-sensei. "Sensei, too, you seem quite well, and healthy, and as usual, and unchanged, and such, and so, really, from the bottom of my heart, ... the worst."

On the road here, since I found out that Utsurigi was captive in that *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou research facility, since I discovered the name *Miyoshi Kokoromi* among the information Chii-kun provided, the anxiety I had felt the whole time, hit bull's eye. The slim hope of just being an identical name was crushed here and now.

"I was just telling this Suzunashi-san about yer heroic deeds. Hysterical life or so, what sorta funny guy ya are. What now– I heard, ya know." Sensei stood from the sofa and dexterously spoke with a cigarette still between her lips.

"Ya dropped out of the Program-? What a wasteful thing ya did! What's in yer head right there?"

"..... Sensei left the System, too. That is why you are here, are you not?"

"Woah there, ya sound like ya didn't want me here? Heheh." Sensei wrapped her arm around my shoulder like old buddies. "But I didn't leave on my own accord ya know. They just fired me."

"It is not supposed to be possible to be fired from that place and be alive..."

But this person.

But this person is capable of twisting the impossible into the possible.

"Well thinking back on it now I might have done a wasteful thing too, ya know. I heard rumors, ya know, like, the System tops, the Fool of the Seas, they said one of 'em died and left a hole or something. If I stuck around maybe I woulda been the one filling that up."

"Of course not. There are plenty of candidates," I kept a facade of calm and I chatted. "Through the grapevine, they mentioned that another

Japanese person may be selected. Saitou something... some strange name."

"Was joking. Yer not even serious but you suck at jokes, ya. An ordinary gal like me wouldn't be able to be a Fool of the Seas, ya know?" sensei said and laughed, "Heheheh," and then slapped my back over and over again. "Yah. Ya still ya, that's pleasing."

"....."

"But, indeed. Still, surprising," Neo-san said extravagantly toward me, still captive due to Kokoromi-sensei. "I figured you weren't just a random ordinary fellow, but I definitely didn't expect you to be an abroad student from that ER Program. Right? Koutari-san. Just as I said, right?"

"You said nothing."

Koutari-san's answer was cold. His arms were folded, and he had a very *I am only here because I tagged along, I would really prefer to go back to my ward* attitude. He was that apathetic and aloof, yet among these people, I felt closest to him for some reason.

"So unpersonable. But we should keep quiet about this to Oogaki-kun. He wanted to enter the Program but wasn't able to. Did the Professor stop him?" Neo-san smirked and continued. "But really, why'd you leave the ER Program? The ER System is an object of admiration to us academics."

"....."

The ER System.

To spill the beans, it is a privately-owned research organization that headquarters itself in Houston, Texas, United States. In a way, it could be categorized along with this *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility, but they are on completely different scales. Compared to that, without meaning any offense to Professor Kyouichirou, but you could basically say that this sort of facility located deep in the middle of nowhere may as well not exist. Collecting from the end of the world to the end of the world, every specialization of every academic field, like the British Museum, collecting them like overzealous, over-expanding Britons, and then mastering them all day and night like a sort of cult of *Scientific Religion*, and a fanatic cult society at that – is the ER System.

And the nurturing of the young performed by that extreme research organization is the ER Program. And to put it in blunt words to avoid misunderstanding, it was like a **research specialization school**. I will avoid detailing my past and such, but I participated in that program starting my

second year of middle school, and around this New Year, dropped out of the Program and danced all the way back to Japan. And that brings us to now, but in the first two years of the roughly five years I spent there, I was instructed by this Pervert Dissection Maniac, Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei.

What sort of personality, and what sort of past she had is something I wish I could detail, but truth be told, I would rather not. To start with, that heroic deed that happened to be told to Suzunashi-san and others just now, the person who produced such an incredibly twisted exam was none other than this Kokoromi-sensei. I believe that is sufficient for explaining her.

That was why when I heard Kokoromi-sensei was leaving the System and returning to Japan, I shouted with exultation. Myself and the other students who were likewise **bound** in tutelage under Kokoromi-sensei borrowed out an entire room that night and had a big party. I am not fond of such gatherings and normally turned invitations down, but even I participated that time. Not just participated, I even downed a shot of vodka in celebration of Kokoromi-sensei's leaving.

When she visited me when I was hospitalized due to acute alcohol poisoning, Kokoromi-sensei ominously prophesied, "Ya know, we'll probably meet again, so let's be friends again," and then left me, covered with graffiti with a marker even though it was not like I had broken any bones (do I need to say who did it?), and then left the hospital, left America.

And so her prophecy came true like this.

"Well, ya know I said that when we parted, but I didn't think we'd actually meet up like this again. Sensei's pleased! Really pleased! Euphoric!"

"Yes, I feel like I am about to cry with happiness, too."

Half of that phrase was not a lie, in any case. All of my old wounds began to ache, and I truly felt like I would cry. I shook away sensei's arm and said to Suzunashi-san, "Well, let us go."

"Shito-kun is probably worn out waiting for us below. If we do not hurry, he might turn into a very harsh straightman."

"Right," Suzunashi-san nodded as she stood up with her tall form. "Well, Miyoshi-san. Thank you for the very interesting conversation. I learned quite a bit."

“Naw, naw, if ya pleased by this stuff I’ve got plenty more to tell ya. I’ll be in the third ward, so if ya want come over during your stay,” Kokoromi-sensei laughed giddily. “Ya too hey, if ya got questions like old times come ask sensei whenever ya please.”

“Pass,” I immediately answered. “And, sensei is probably busy with work anyways.”

”*Work* eh...” sensei faintly laughed. Ahh, this laugh. This laugh, that she made whenever she was figuring out how to insert a scalpel into something.

“But ya know, if **this** counts for *work* don’tcha think living would be real easy? Hmm?”

”.....”

“Well, we’ve probably got plenty to catch up on, but we can do that when we’ve both got time, just the two of us.”

“Catch up on? I have nothing of the sort with you,” I borrowed Kunagisa’s words and bounced them at sensei. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“That’s pretty lonesome. If that were true, anyways.”

Sensei did not budge, continuing to chuckle.

“Well, shall we leave as well, Koutari-san. The Professor’ll scold us again.”

“He’ll only scold you.”

Neo-san nudged Koutari-san, and Koutari-san responded curtly to that, and they both left the smoking room, passing by my side. Neo-san gave an extravagant bow to everyone, and Koutari-san made no motion at all. Indeed, they were a pair that were on opposite extremes. Though despite that, it did not seem they were on unfriendly terms.

Then, I remembered Utsurugi’s words.

“Um, Koutari-san.”

”..... What?” he turned around with an agitated voice. “What do you want?”

“You should cut your hair.”

”.....”

Koutari-san reacted as if he had just been told some sort of code, and then after a bit of silence, “None of your business,” seemed to cut me away

instead of his hair. And then he lined up with Neo-san and walked toward the elevator hall.

"Alright, I'll be heading off then too. Can't leave Kasugai-chan waiting, ya know."

Kasugai-san – right. Misachi-san had same something like *Suzunashi-san is speaking to Professor Miyoshi and Professor Kasugai*, but only sensei was here. Assuming that the odd couple had passed by and joined the conversation afterwards, where had Kasugai-san gone?

"Kasugai-chan said *it's boring listening to stories about that inexplicable kid* and went back to the third floor alone."

Sensei said, sensing my curiosity.

Yes, I do not know how she looks yet, but based on that, Kasugai-san seemed like a relatively ordinary person. Of course, I do not know if that will be the case, but I shall hope for that.

"Well, let's have some sake the next time we meet. Alright then. Until then, have a good one!"

And then sensei left, leaving just Suzunashi-san and I in the smoking room. Suzunashi-san crushed her cigarette, which had already been burned down to just its filter, on the ash tray, and then turned to me saying "Inoji."

"No problems with the meeting with Sir Utsurigi?"

"– I would not say without problems, but for the most part it went as Suzunashi-san probably imagines, without much difference."

"Mm," nodded Suzunashi-san. "That is largely positive. Good, good. Well, I steeped myself in this place as well. Although Misachi-san's stoicism threw me for a loop."

"You cannot call that stoicism. Stoicism would cry. So, what do you think? Of looking around *Mad Demon*."

"What do I think? – I have no idea what's going on. Well, not knowing what's going on is what was fun. But you know, it was like walking around a foreign country. Hey, Inoji," Suzunashi-san said.

"You know... Ao-chan and Sir Utsurugi, do they really have better minds than Professor Shadou Kyouichirou? If you were to ask me, having glanced about like this, it'd be hard for me to say that."

"You should not judge people by their appearance – although that might be silly to say to you," I shrugged my shoulders. "Who knows. That part is

extremely gray. How smart someone is cannot be quantified, after all – not that we are referring to the exam that was mentioned earlier."

"..... If there were to be a problem, it may be to do with their generation."

Suzunashi-san mumbled with an odd confidence.

Shadou Kyouichirou – sixty-three years old. Utsurigi Gaisuke – thirty-five years old. And then Kunagisa Tomo – nineteen years old.

There is no point to comparing the full potential of each. After all, each person lived in a different era, and particularly in the case of the final one, Kunagisa Tomo, one can expect plenty of future growth.

Although one could say whether Kunagisa would actually grow is a question of its own.

"Don't you think a difference in era is more decisive than talent? Inoji," Suzunashi-san continued. "In the end – when it comes to what sort of era one's lived in, of the three, Professor, Sir Utsurigi, Ao-chan, the last, Ao-chan, has clearly been the most blessed. She's already got all the tools and routes. It's the same as if she were to play her hand last in rock-scissors-paper."

Those that must clear the path, and those that simply have to walk that path. Which is easier, and which produces more results, does not require any thought to answer. No matter what, the one who follows always has a superior path – well, that certainly is an argument with its merits.

However.

"It is not that simple..." at the very least, having listened to the two conversations earlier, I could not believe such a thing. On one hand what Suzunashi-san said is the truth, but it was not the full truth. "..... You know, we normal people would not understand the problems between those three. I think it is better for us to not think about it."

"Perhaps. So, Inoji. Where's that Ao-chan? I do not see her, did you hide her in your pocket?"

"Ahh... I sent her off to the lower floor first. I thought it would be wrong to leave Shito-kun waiting too much."

"Hmm, sent her off," Suzunashi-san repeated my words. "..... In other words, you would go to that length, to the point of even leaving your precious, precious Ao-chan in the hands of Shito-kun, to avoid having Ao-chan hear about your past."

”..... What are you talking about, Suzunashi-san,” I jokingly replied while continuing to walk. “Kunagisa knows everything – about my participation with the ER Program, about how I crossed paths with the ER System. Kunagisa’s brother was the one who introduced me to them, anyways, so is that not obvious?”

“But you’ve kept quiet to Ao-chan about **what you did** over there.”

It was a conclusive line. My legs buckled a bit.

”..... Did you hear something from sensei?”

“Heard... if I did it would be so much simpler,” Suzunashi-san lined up by my side. She kept her eyes fixated ahead, avoiding eye contact with me. “Unfortunately, all I heard from Miyoshi-san were funny stories. She probably understands, you know. She seems loose-lipped but she always dodges the important stuff. Her light-hearted attitude is probably just a facade. You’ve got quite an instructor, Inoji.”

“Why thank you,” I forced myself to act the clown. “Your words of praise are much too great for me to accept.”

“I wasn’t praising you, though. I heard nothing. But Inoji, you have something you don’t want heard, don’t you? By Ao-chan, and if possible, by me, too. That you hid sensei’s existence up till now is proof.”

“Oh come, come. I had simply forgotten. That is not proof at all.”

”..... Some people may find hiding their past and the like cool, but at the very least, I think that’s stupid.”

”..... I do not intend to be looking cool.”

“Right, that’s right. So I won’t ask now. I understand how you feel, and I think you don’t necessarily have to say everything, even to Ao-chan. Everyone, you and I, even Asano, must live while carrying the burden of a stomach-full of secrets. You aren’t special that way. You aren’t special in any way. That’s why,” Suzunashi-san took one step ahead of me.

“Please stop betraying what you hold precious.”

”.....”

Betray. Betraying.

”..... Suzunashi-san.”

“And that’s the end of this lecture. We can leave the rest for some other time,” Suzunashi-san turned around and patted my head. “Well, let’s hurry on down. Shito-kun and Ao-chan must be bored waiting.”

”..... Right.”

I slowly nodded.

And resumed walking forward. And I thought it was truly well that Suzunashi-san had accompanied us on this trip this time.

We used the elevator and arrived at the first floor. As soon as we appeared, Shito-kun shouted at us.

"You're late! Did you all ride a turtle or something? What am I, Otohime? Don't make me give you a tamatebako![12]"

"That's right, Ii-chan," this time even Kunagisa agreed with Shito-kun. "Late, late. Boku-sama-chan was about to die waiting."

"Sorry," I quickly apologized. "And, Shito-kun, where is the inn?"

"Uwah, this bastard makes us wait all this time and just apologizes with one word. Ahh. I haven't been there much myself. I just guide people there when we have guests. It's like at the end of the trees. Near the wall. We all call it the *Haunted Mansion*," Shito-kun said ominously, and then he threw the key to me. "Here, a key to a room. There're three rooms, so use them however you want."

"Thanks. Well, I will take a shower and wait."

"Alright. I'll head over as soon as I'm done with work so be ready– as if!" Shito-kun shouted. "Cut that out! Stop making me the butt of jokes! I'll kill you!"

"And Ii-chan, that one was vulgar....."

"..... Scum."

The three of them stared at me coldly.

I tried to brighten the mood and this is what I get.

"– Gosh, what a stupid joke... Alright, let's go."

Shito-kun followed protocols to open the door, and we passed through the courtyard of the wards, heading deeper into the facility. It was the opposite direction of the entrance we used coming into the grounds, and it took us further from Utsurigi's seventh ward.

Drip.

A drop of water grazed my nose. I looked up, and it was like the sky was about to cry. Within a few hours, we would be having some heavy rain. I vaguely thought that the failure of a human would probably analogize this as *a steppe of clouds cutting through like people toward people, like skies toward skies, like raindrops toward raindrops*.

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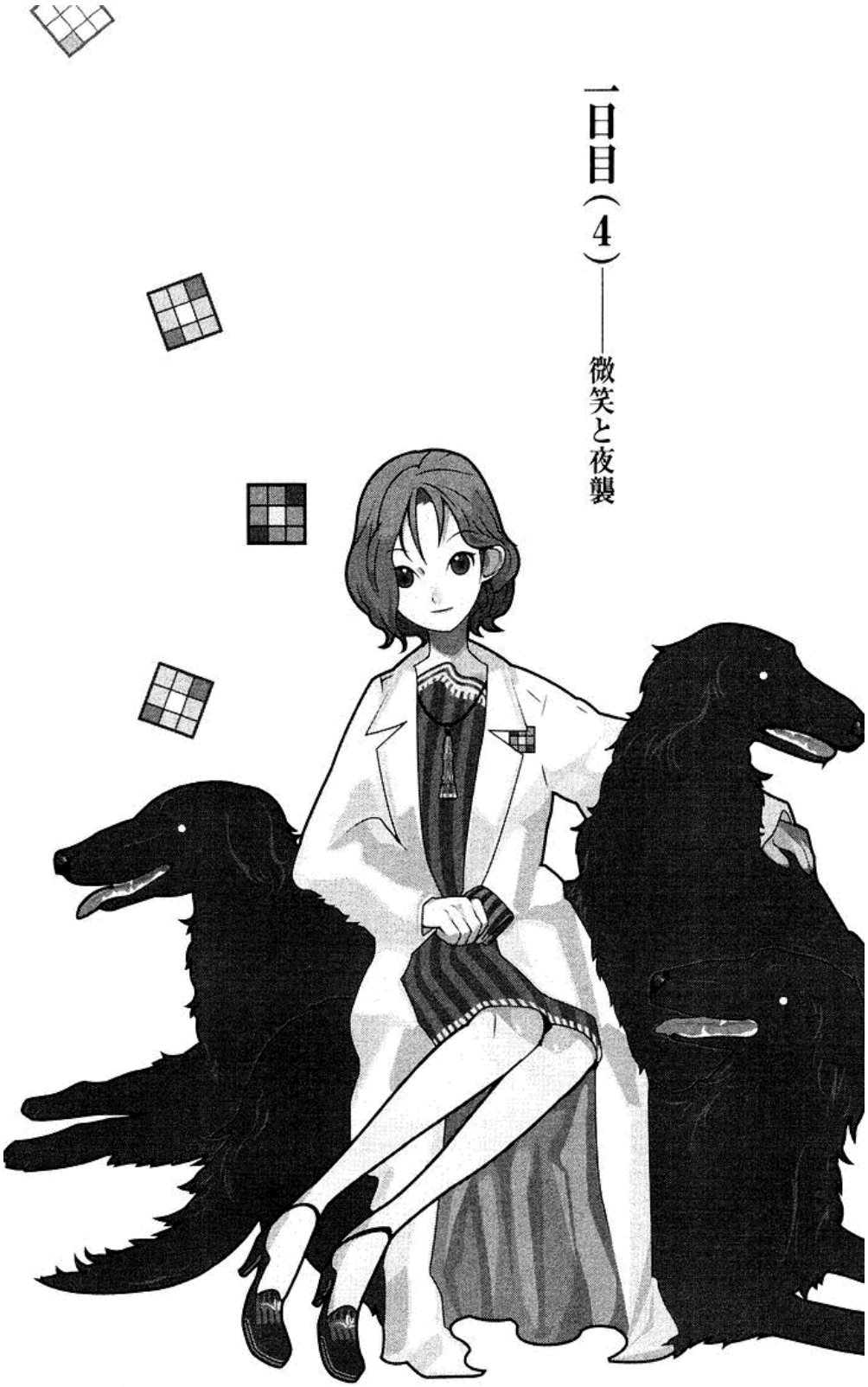
[1] sick, yamitsuki, pun!
[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HKnHnUk0S8 for example of process
[3] Based off Russell's Paradox
[4] However, this is written 戦操. War is written 戦争 (sensou), but the latter letter is actually taken from exercise 体操 (taisou), resulting in something like a war exercise. I assume the reading is still sensou/war, however, so I kept war.
[5] stoppage
[6] indestructible
[7] impure
[8] immortal
[9] User of Nonsense
[10] soul-seeing
[11] expanding seaweed, which is basically just dried seaweed
[12] this is all a reference to Urashima Taro

一日目（4）——微笑と夜襲



春日井春日 KASUGAI KASUGA 研究局員。

Day 1 (4)

Mild Laugh and Night Assault

0

A tragedy isn't when an incident occurs.
When an incident doesn't occur, it's a tragedy.

1

What Professor Shadou Kyouichirou said as *too dirty for the Lady of Kunagisa*, what Assistant Oogaki Shito said as *Haunted Mansion*, were not exaggerated at all. If anything, they were incredibly fitting.

It was a such a building that one might think it would better be called an abandoned building more than an inn, such that it seemingly had never been touched up since its construction, such that it may have been built as an experiment for a report on how concrete solidifies. Such a building stood at the back of the forest, so it could only be an object of fear. It would be more surprising for a ghost to not appear in this inn.

Of course, our group consisted of Suzunashi Neon and Kunagisa Tomo, both of whom astoundingly showed no reaction at all, or if anything seemed to be on the side of being pleased. Suzunashi-san said, "my, it seems quite fitting. I wish I could take a photo, Asano would be overjoyed," in a cool fashion, and she seemed so eager to enter that she was tugging my shirt, which seemed to cause Shito-kun to be genuinely frightened.

An abandoned building... or which could also be described as a three-story inn. We were to stay on the second floor, through the three doors that were aligned right next to the stairs. Kunagisa took the first door, Suzunashi-san took the second door, and I took the third door. Given the

outside, I thought I should not expect much of the interior; however, the interior was actually relatively alright. Of course, alright was still simply relative to that exterior. If we were to bring that extremely fastidious maid here, she would probably go insane, unleashing all of her pent-up stress, is what I absent-mindedly thought.

We finished our belated dinner, then laundered our lives by taking a bath in order (Suzunashi-san → Kunagisa → Me was the order we took a bath. By the time I went in, there was almost no water left. It was because Kunagisa had put up a fight), and then after midnight, the three of us gathered in Kunagisa's room.

Kunagisa was lying around on her bed, Suzunashi-san leaned against the wall while almost dozing off, and I had my back to the door, wondering why Suzunashi-san's pajamas were a china shirt.

"Hmmm. Hmmm hmmm hmmm."

For whatever number time, Kunagisa groaned.

"Really, what to do-."

"What to do-, you mean about Utsurigi?"

That had come up in our conversation many times over dinner and also when Suzunashi-san was taking a bath. It was a topic, but of course no solution ever came forth. There would never be a solution for that. And I said,

"There is nothing that can be done, is there?"

The same thing I said during our discussions to this point.

"If the obstacle were only Professor Kyouichirou it would be one thing, but – if Utsurigi himself does not intend to leave, then it would be impossible to drag him out."

"That's the thing – that's why I'm in a bind. Ahh, gosh. Boku-sama-chan hates being in a bind-."

"……."

Utsurigi had apparently said to Kunagisa.

Indeed, by being here I end up in the shape such that I am submissive to Professor Kyouichirou. This workplace is like a garbage can compared to when you were the leader, when I was surrounded by members like Cheetah and Double Flip.

But that's because you had, and they had immeasurable talent, and so this place isn't too shabby. Professor Kyouichirou pursues things I think of. Isn't that

enough? Two people thinking is always better than one person thinking, after all.

It was a truly reasonable answer.

It was a truly far-too-reasonable answer.

Reasonable such that it could not be true.

"Sacchan isn't the type to say something like that – he must be hiding something important," Kunagisa rolled over on the bed. "I don't know what, but he's definitely hiding something, that Sacchan."

"Something – that is probably related to Professor Kyouichirou's confidence. That steadfast confidence," I said. "However, whatever he is hiding and whatever he is not hiding, either way Utsurigi has no intention of leaving that building, right? Let us say we somehow miraculously succeed in dragging Utsurigi out from there. But then we would have to compromise with that Professor Kyouichirou, right? Given the conversation earlier, I cannot help but feel like that is also impossible. The phrase inflexible and obstinate senior fits him perfectly, so it is not whether it might be impossible, it just is impossible. And one impossible might be something that can be dealt with, but two together? There is nothing that can be done."

"Impossible and impossible... well, about Professor Kyouichirou – yup, right. Sacchan was always an unpredictable factor, but I had already prepared a way of dealing with that one. But, I didn't think he'd actually still be holding a grudge toward boku-sama-chan. What a grudge-holder."

Kunagisa squirmed across the bed. Squirm I said, but she remained facing upward, so that looked rather eerie. Or rather, this was the first time I had ever seen someone move by squirming on their back.

Kunagisa scrounged through her belongings, and then pulled out some circular case with a disk, and tossed that to me. I caught it with my right hand. Of course, I am not a CD drive just by having caught it, so I could not read its contents just by that. I asked Kunagisa, "What is this?"

"According to my knowledge, having studied electronic engineering at the ER Program, I can deduce this to be a circular disk."

"Yup... well, if you couldn't deduce that much you'd be having a tough life ahead."

"CD-ROM. Hmm... so this is the reason why you said *a bunch of gifts* and *tomorrow*?"

In other words, Kunagisa's wild card.

"Actually that's not a CD-ROM, but, exactly. Egg-zact-lee."

Kunagisa swung her hand up and down. It seemed she wanted it back. I tossed the case back like a frisbee, but Kunagisa did not catch it with her hand, instead taking it in the face.

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

"It hurts."

Well of course.

"So you were wanting to exchange the contents of that with Utsurigi Gaisuke. However, data that can be compressed in under 700 MB and the intellect of Utsurigi Gaisuke, an ex-member of *Team* or an ex-member of *Cluster*... the Professor did not seem the type to accept such an unbalanced trade."

"Information isn't quantity but quality, Ii-chan. If you get fooled by numbers for everything you'll take a pretty big beating, in a lot of ways. Forget 700 MB, there was a genius machinist who **brought** electronic darkness onto the entire world with a mere 16 byte program."

"What is that. *Green Green Green*?"

"– even Sacchan wouldn't do something that grievous. Sacchan knew of limits – just knew, but anyways he knew. But **that** never bothered learning about limits. The one who did that wasn't part of *Team*. Rather, **it** was like part of the extreme opposite."

Kunagisa's expression momentarily turned into something very unpeaceful. It was the same expression she showed when she was dealing with Utsurigi Gaisuke, when she was confronting Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

"**It** wasn't a hacker or a cracker, or any branching issue like that. – you know, Ii-chan. There definitely **are**, in this world. For a slight whim, for no reason whatsoever, off a tiny ponder and thought, without the least of effort, inhumane ones that want to stomp all over the planet. Non-human-species for whom the logic and theory and tactics and strategies that our human side uses are completely and utterly useless. *One* that far surpasses

the *Cluster* **exists** – no, once **existed**, that sort of being. The existence called *Desert Fox*–"

I felt as if a cold breeze had swept through the room. However, before I could realize that this was just a false feeling, Kunagisa returned to her carefree tone and expression, and she said "well, leaving those outlier cases aside," while picking up the case.

"But Ii-chan's worry whiffed either way. This disk has plenty of quality as well as plenty of quantity. This is called a C3D and is media that boasts a memory capacity of 140 GB. It's not produced for practical purposes yet... but it's probably a question of time. Anyways, this has lots and lots, without wasting a single byte, of data. Chii-kun and Acchan helped me, too."

"So the *suspicious activity* that you had been doing while cooped up in your room is that," I nodded. "I see... a wild card. Certainly and certainly that is not ordinary. Then that might indeed have enough value to trade of the intellect of one genius."

After all, it is an extreme work of art produced by three former members of *Team* from full scratch. I did not really comprehend, having never seen it myself, but if a person with knowledge were to see it, if a scientist specializing in information engineering or mathematical theory were to see it, they would see *information* worth ditching everything for. And that came in a package of unprecedented proportions, a whole 140 gigabytes. Even that stubborn Professor Kyouichirou's wall might–

"– then why are you worried? If you have this, then the first problem might as well already be dealt with."

"Yup. But Ii-chan probably deduced too, having spoken to the Professor, but – I mentioned it, didn't I, while we were walking to see Sacchan? That the Professor's progressed even more."

"You did say something like that," I remembered something vaguely about a scientist's duty or lifestyle or something. I responded while remembering. "And?"

"So, that's what. That's that," Kunagisa sighed. "Boku-sama-chan was careless, too careless – there's no real point in saying this now, but I thought something was strange. That someone like Shadou Kyouichirou – this isn't sarcasm, Ii-chan. Leaving aside my reaction when I was twelve, right now, boku-sama-chan actually thinks Professor has been doing

something amazing – that someone like Shadou Kyouichirou would do something like obsess over Sacchan's intellect, I could never figure out the answer. The Professor is plenty genius without doing something like that, and he wasn't the type to have any interest in honor or status or anything."

"But Utsurigi's **level of genius** is on a higher plane from the Professor, right?"

"It's not a question of high or low. **Higher plane** isn't something that works for genius. And, you probably understood this well from the **conversation** earlier, but – that person, is quite proud. Right?"

"Right, but..." or rather, I felt like that attitude leaned more toward the side of abnormal. "... so what?"

"People with a lot of pride, they have a lot of problems, but that's one area where you can trust them."

"Hmm. Well I would have to nod to that..."

Indeed, someone who cared for honor or status would probably not stow away deep, deep, deep in the mountains like this. That was not just for the Professor, but for all the other researchers as well.

"However, then why is Professor Kyouichirou so fixated on Utsurigi..."

If, just if their stated reason was truly just a fake. Then what was the Professor trying to do, accepting such a dishonor?

"He was still cute when he was researching artificial intelligence and the possibility of artificial life... but I see, that's without a doubt *Mad Demon*. No matter how you try to defend it, that thought process is very inhuman. He's completely fallen," Kunagisa suddenly sat up and then looked at me. "Ii-chan, to begin with, what do you think a *Demon* is?"

".....? A demon, you mean like a devil, right?"

"Yup. That's one way of looking at it. That's certainly one way. Ii-chan's way of putting it might be right. But, in the world of information cryptography, where the Professor resides, it holds a different meaning. A *Demon* is a **process** that waits and carefully observes for a **certain condition**, and waits and waits and waits and waits some more, and then when the condition materializes they execute their pre-configured function. ..... perhaps the Professor, since meeting boku-sama-chan – no, even before then, may have been waiting – for this type of chance. A mad demon – an insane process. Well-stated. Sacchan's preferred psycho and logical way of thinking is far better."

”.....”

Kunagisa said all of that with a very serious tone, but I did not understand in the least what Kunagisa was saying. Not talking about the same thing – this seemed like a case of that. Kunagisa’s feeling of danger was not coming across to me. What was she fearing, I could not piece together at all. However, even so, there was no mistaking that things may be turning out for the worst.

“I don’t get it. But basically,” Kunagisa said. “That chance that finally appeared, that chance, that opportunity that finally appeared when he became sixty-three, whether the Professor would trade that for one or two of these discs is actually very dubious.”

“Does that mean what the Professor is doing has more value than the contents of that disc, which was created by *Team*, *Cluster*?”

“That’s not it. I’ll guarantee that in terms of value this disc is probably much higher. A hundred of a hundred people would answer that way, and it would be the same if we raised the number to a thousand people. But determining the difference in absolute value and relative value is hard to calculate. Not to steal the Professor’s words, but one scientist threw his entire life – an entire single life into that research. I think that’s irreplaceable, that can’t be traded for anything. If I were to think about it from something other than logic or fair trade.”

“Really? I would have to disagree,” I questioned Kunagisa’s lines. “I do not think a scientist would say such a romanticized thing. In the end, Academia is about getting to a result and deflecting everything else, right?”

“My, Inoji. That’s an odd thing to say. The entire profession of a scientist is a romanticism, isn’t it?”

Suzunashi-san, who I had thought was already in her dreams, suddenly broke her silence, cutting into our conversation.

“Without being a romanticist, no one would think of something idiotic like firing a rocket to the moon. Getting perfect marks on a test, too, is after all just a boy’s romance, isn’t it?”

“Romance...”

That may indeed be as Suzunashi-san said. I thought of one scientist that I met this April, and nodded at Suzunashi-san’s words. However, I could not imagine that old man Shadou Kyouichirou was so simple. He was

far away from such simplicity, an incredible vile type of person. I am saying it, so it must be right.

"And you know. I thought maybe I shouldn't butt in being an outsider, so I tried to stay quiet, but this conversation is still really messed up, Inoji, Ao-chan," Suzunashi-san continued. "Inoji, first of all, you said *let us say we somehow miraculously succeed* earlier, but that isn't a problem you can be taking into your own hands, right? Why is Inoji the one dictating Sir Utsurigi's will?"

"No, that was just part of the conversation..."

"Hah, part of the conversation. What a handy phrase," Suzunashi-san laughed, dryly. "And then, Ao-chan."

"Uni?" Kunagisa twisted her neck toward Suzunashi-san. "Did boku-sama-chan say something odd?"

"Something odd... no, maybe it's more odd that someone like me would be talking back to a girl as smart as Ao-chan, but I'll say it anyways," Suzunashi-san paused for a moment. "Hey, Ao-chan, I just think, if Sir Utsurigi himself says he doesn't want to leave this place, isn't that fine? If Sir Utsurigi is fine being here, then why do you want to push him out with you? If you're thinking of *saving* him then that's just being selfish. If Sir Utsurigi wants to remain here of his own accord, then you're just butting in."

"But Suzunashi-san," I could not restrain myself, firing a retort at Suzunashi-san. "According to Chii-kun, Professor Kyouichirou has blackmail... **or something like that** over Utsurigi. And based on our conversation with the Professor, I feel like that must be the case. That means that Utsurigi is being restrained here. In other words, even before his physical imprisonment in the seventh ward, he is being locked in place by an invisible chain. Then – in that case I would not be able to call it his own will."

"Even so. Did Sir Utsurigi say to Ao-chan or Ii-chan *please help me*, or even show it in his demeanor? If so, I would understand. Fine, in that case even I would try to help. Not to steal Asano's words but a man must show his dutifulness – this is what any person would do."

She said, and then Suzunashi-san stared straight through us.

"However, right now you two are wrong. Completely wrong. Absolutely wrong, so wrong you're shooting the wrong way. So wrong, so wrong, that

you're on the opposite extreme. That... who was it? Chii-kun? You learned of Sir Utsurigi's *pinch* from Chii-kun's information, received help from Acchan to create a *plan*, and arrived here at the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility. Now, Inoji, where are you saying Sir Utsurigi Gaisuke's will lies? Or perhaps Ao-chan wants to say that because they were friends some time ago, that she can understand what Sir Utsurigi is thinking?"

"....."

"Suzunashi-san, you are going too far."

Kunagisa went silent, and I noted that and turned to Suzunashi-san. However, Suzunashi-san did not mind at all, instead responding, "Actually, not far enough."

"This isn't far enough at all," and this time Suzunashi-san turned solely to me. "Then, how about I say – what if miraculously and incredible and unexpectedly."

Because this was a serious mood I opted not to act the straightman.

"Sir Utsurigi actually wants to leave this place. Let us say that he really wants to leave but for reasons he cannot. Let's presume that with our own personal and biased judgment. However, despite that desire, he remains here – *imprisoned* do you want to call it? That's what he's doing. Then I think you should respect his decision."

"Respect...?"

"Respect. Because an adult man has **even thrown away** his own life, a single life in order to remain here, right? He's submitting to someone who's less talented than he, but he's fine with that, isn't he? Then isn't that alright? There's no reason at all to interject. It seems like you're mistaking something so I'm going to correct you on this, but Sir Utsurigi isn't a child. If anything, it's you two who've lived about half of him–"

Suzunashi-san pointed at me and Kunagisa, in order.

"It's you two who are children."

Children.

That is true.

Until it was pointed out to us, I was about to forget, that of course myself, but Kunagisa Tomo as well, along with her childish appearance, were both just children. A child of nineteen years and maybe three or four extra months.

"– yup."

After a while, Kunagisa nodded. She had an expression of seriousness that I had never once seen before.

"I think what Neon-chan says is correct. I truly think that what Neon-chan says is correct. About that. And honestly, even boku-sama-chan, if Sacchan really thinks that it's fine, I wouldn't bother interjecting."

"Hmm?" Suzunashi-san opened her eyes wide. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that if Sacchan is hiding something, then that's fine on its own. Boku-sama-chan has no intent of butting in to Sacchan's business more than needed. But, Neon-chan, the problem here is with Professor Kyouichirou. With the goal of *Mad Demon* Professor Shadou Kyouichirou."

"..... what do you mean?" this time I asked. "Of course the Professor seems like someone with a lot of problems... but by *goal*, do you mean the Professor is scheming something?"

"That's why – or rather, Ii-chan, don't you think it's weird? That there're only six researchers in this enormous facility? Add the Assistant Shito-chan and you still only have seven. When boku-sama-chan went to the Hokkaido facility with Nao-kun, there were at least thirty researchers."

"Well, I thought it was odd, at least – but that just means quality over quantity, right?"

This sort of research activity differs from sports in that just having superior numbers counted little. In fact, having more and more people caused a meshing of a lot more thoughts, and causes things to lose clarity. Athletic prowess has a differentiation between top and bottom, too, but it is still small compared to the difference in thinking abilities and process.

"Yup, right, exactly. So, Ii-chan. Don't you think that the number one reason of having a small number of elite is because it's beneficial to keeping secrets?"

"I understand that, but... this facility does a sufficient job of keeping secrets, does it not? Is there any point in reducing the number of people on top of it?"

"On the other hand, you could deduce that the Professor is doing something that requires secrecy to that extent, don't you think?"

"..... you look like you deduced something."

"Yup. Just a guess, though."

Kunagisa paused.

"But, you know, you would have to be guessing to think of something like this. But you know, the architecture and placement of this facility, and the researchers that were gathered – Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, and Miyoshi Kokoromi, Kasugai Kasuga – if you mix them together with Chii-kun's information – and then do some mental math, you'll probably realize that it's probably right."

"……."

"The reason for locking Sacchan – Utsurigi Gaisuke here isn't to perform research together – isn't for receiving advice. Professor Kyouichirou **isn't treating Sacchan as a researcher**."

"– not a… researcher?"

"Using Sacchan's power because of his own lacking – that was the wrong assumption. The Professor would never have done such a thing. Ii-chan. What Professor Shadou Kyouichirou is conspiring to do,"

Kunagisa.

Looked at me with a desperate, clinging look.

"Is to create an Ultra Humanoid Dogma[1)] using *Green Green Green* Utsurigi Gaisuke himself as an **test body**."

2

It is time for philosophy, curtain two.

According to what I heard from Kokoromi-sensei, it is considered common-knowledge among biological scientists that the most powerful life form on Earth is, without a doubt, bacteria. Bacteria exists everywhere on Earth and has propagating abilities full digits better than any other. If one considers bacteria's propagating abilities a 1, then even someone completely clueless would realize that human beings would rate 1/100,000,000,000,000. That is a number that mathematically is synonymous with zero. In other words, from the perspective of bacteria, humans might as well not exist.

However, bacteria have no intelligence. I cannot determine for sure that they do not have intelligence, for I have never experienced being bacteria myself, but I assume I can make that conclusion. And if you think from that perspective, *Humans have without a doubt intelligence. Therefore, it should be said that humans are superior life forms to bacteria. When and where would you find bacteria using a computer to enjoy the internet?* is a question that naturally appears. I think that is a perfectly fine way of looking at it. Regardless of whether the culture and inventions that human intelligence have brought forth are good or evil... no, **being that they are good and evil**, it is the truth that they must be acknowledged as being valuable.

However, I think that this would mean that it would simply be following the same path as the paradox of energy conservation. For example, if I were to create an application using C, I would first go to a bookstore to buy a book on C, no, I would first buy an introductory book, read that, and then turn the computer power on, and awkwardly and hesitantly type the language, and complete the application. Then on one hand, what would Kunagisa Tomo or Utsurigi Gaisuke, hackers that were part of *Team* do? Simple, they would **simply** make the application. How to do it, what to do, they do not think of such things. It is like riding a bicycle, and there is not even a trick to it. That is how veterans work. They do not even think. In the

end, the reason why good memory does not equal genius is because unreasonable things like this exist. They do not even need to remember.

But no matter how superior they may be, what they can do is the same as me.

Is there actually superiority when it comes to human life forms which pieced together culture, society, research, technology, and academia in order to survive, and when it comes to bacteria which just live? Of course, I do not have even an inkling of intent to look up with reverence at the smallest of life forms, to look down with disdain on the gods of all things. What I am questioning is not in this case intelligence itself, but the why of intelligence. If no matter how masterful and expertly you become you still do the same thing, then what is it that you might seek?

"Such questions should be stated once you have actually mastered something yourself, so some pitiful nobody like me saying that would simply be a self-pitying cry. Philosophy over."

I mumbled, and then opened my eyes.

It was past one in the morning. The place is the courtyard of the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility – a bricked area surrounded by the research wards – and I sat there alone. Afterwards I left Kunagisa's room and returned to my room, and went to bed at once, but in the end I was oddly awake – or rather I had too many things to think about – and so, unable to sleep, I sneaked out of the inn and walked all the way here.

It was not raining yet. The rain clouds seem to be teasing, as if they would rain any minute, any minute. It was fairly warm during the afternoon, but once it became midnight, as you would expect from being so deep in the mountains, along with the air circulation, it became quite cold. I thought, *why did you walk out despite it being so cold?* as I kept trudging forward.

Suddenly, I turned my head. I faced the third research ward. The third research ward. In other words, the abode of instructor Miyoshi Kokoromi. I wondered if that human dissection maniac was already aslumber. Who knows, these buildings (although there were for the inn) lacked windows, so there was no way to tell if there was lighting inside.

"....."

Researchers who lectured at the ER Program were a galaxy of peoples, and as a result, classes were taught in all sorts of languages, but when it

would come to Japanese there only managed to be Kokoromi-sensei. As such, as a Japanese, and at the same time as someone who came from the Kansai region, I naturally became a sort of medium, and ended up interacting with Kokoromi-sensei a lot.

Of course, there were a good number of Japanese study-abroad students like me (and foreigners who understood the Western Japanese dialect), but most of them dropped out of the Program. The nickname given to Kokoromi-sensei, who forced one young talent after another to drop out of the Program was *Early Harvester*. Incidentally, the nickname given to me, the lone student to not drop out under Kokoromi-sensei's tutelage was *Harakiri*[2] *Masochist*.

"..... huh?"

Now that I thought about it, I feel like I was given the more terrible nickname.

"..... however, well, really, to end up meeting up again in a place like this..."

This trip was supposed to be a reunion of Kunagisa and Utsurigi Gaisuke, but it ended up becoming a reunion for me as well.

I remembered Suzunashi-san's words. The words Suzunashi-san said to me right after reuniting with sensei. And Suzunashi-san was completely correct. I do not want to tell Kunagisa what I did over there. Probably for the same reason that I do not want to know what sort of *Team* Kunagisa and Utsurigi and the others were.

"Y'know, I feel like I've become a really nasty person lately... was I always like this?"

In other words, that could mean that my facade was being torn off.

Just then, I heard the sound of an animal growling. As for where, in this darkness, where it was hard to even see myself, I would not know unless it were the enormous size of the research wards. I tensed up to some extent, and looked around. However, I saw nothing. Just as I thought I might have been hearing things, once again from somewhere, I could hear a growling, reverberating voice – no, sound.

"Can hear the voice but cannot see the figure... yet not hiding that odor..."

It was probably wrong to say aloud such an unfitting, joking line, as for just a moment, my concentration waned. And before that moment ended,

that – no, **they** jumped at me.

One from behind, one from ahead.

"–!"

Of course, I was pushed down. I crumpled to the brick ground right-side down, and hit my left arm hard on the ground. I was able to cushion myself a bit, but it did not seem I would be able to get back up soon. No, even if I could **they** would not allow me. **They** pinned me down with immense strength, and then – **licked** my face.

"....."

And that was when I realized.

"..... dog?"

Dogs. Two, black and large enough to be the size of a middle-school boy, dogs. They **growled** as they **licked** my face. Saliva covered my face, and to be frank it was inordinately unpleasant, but *they* pinned me down with their front legs – and the two of them both, at that – so I was unable to move. I could not even attempt to struggle to break free, and could only let them do what they pleased.

I see, I could not see them because they had jet-black fur and melded in with the darkness, and the reason why I could not discern where the growl was coming from was because there were two of them growling individually... I calmly thought while being violated by the dogs.

"————t."

A voice.

I heard a human voice, this time. I was not able to hear what was said, so I lifted my head a bit, and turned in the direction of the voice. Because of the darkness I was unable to see very clearly, but I could tell at least that someone was standing there.

"– stop it."

It was a woman. She said that with a terribly cold, yet astonishingly clearly enunciated, voice. The moment they heard that, the two dogs stepped away from me. And then they quickly trotted to where she stood. I was finally freed, and placed my hands on the ground to lift myself, and shook my head, and wiped the saliva off my face with my sleeves. When I looked at my chest, I found four clean dog paw-prints, like you might see in a comic. It felt more pathetic than pitiful.

“Sorry about that, boy,” she said with the same, cold voice. “I didn’t think any human would be walking about at midnight, so I didn’t put a leash on them. I humbly apologize, like so.”

It was a way of speaking that had no intonation whatsoever. There was not a single punctuation. But even so, it is a bit hard to explain but, her pronunciation and voice were as clear as a singer, and so it was not at all difficult to understand.

”.....” I slowly stood up, and stepped closer to her. ”..... no, I do not mind.”

“A strange boy to say you do not mind despite having that much saliva on your face.”

She laughed a little. And then she came toward me herself, and wiped my face with a handkerchief she took out of her pocket. I felt oddly embarrassed (in the sense that I can wipe my own face), but all I could do was let her do what she wanted.

While letting her do what she wanted, I observed. Lab coat. In other words, this means she is a researcher. I mean, this was not a middle school uniform or anything, and I do not think there is any obligation to always wear these things in a research facility, but it seemed in this Kyouichirou Research Facility, the researchers all had a habit of wearing a lab coat.

That means, this person.

”..... yes. Much manlier,” she said that bizarre line more befitting an old lady, and put her handkerchief back in her pocket. “I’m Kasugai Kasuga – but you probably already knew. – are you the rumored Kunagisa Tomo?”

“No. The inexplicable kid.”

“Ahh, the accompanying boy who came back to Japan. Now that you mention it your hair isn’t blue. And you’re a boy. You’re a boy, right? I’m sorry. I couldn’t tell because it’s dark.”

She nodded, and stretched her right hand to me. It seemed she was wanting a handshake. I hesitated a bit, but decided to take her hand.

The two enormous dogs meandered about at Kasugai’s feet, as if in servitude to her. Now that I looked at them once more from a distance, I thought they had adorable faces. What is their species? They looked like Dobermans, but I felt like they were slightly too big for that. They were one or two sizes bigger than Saint Bernards or Pyrenees. Given their large size

they might even be mixed breeds, but these two seemed to have a sort of an elegant air about them.

"I think it's quite dangerous to walk about at this hour," Kasugai-san said with a stern feel to her voice after our parting hands. "This is a research facility with some numbers of confidential things. Wouldn't you prefer not having a painless stomach sifted through? Or did you have business with someone?"

"Yes, well...." I responded with a stuttered tongue, in complete opposite of Kasugai-san. "I am actually trying to remember that right now."

"Trying to remember?"

"I have bad memory, so I forgot why I left the inn."

"You like jokes I see, despite how you look. You are that Miyoshi-chan's disciple, after all."

Kasugai-san laughed with just her lips, "ufufu." I was not joking or anything, but nothing good would happen if I were to try to persuade her by replying with something like, "no, really. My memory is like zero, so it is basically zero. I am scum. Sometimes I forget my own name. Forgetting would be alright but sometimes I remember it wrong. So in that case my memory is not zero, it is negative. When I was in elementary school, I wrote the name of the girl sitting next to me on an exam, and then answered everything wrong and caused her to get a zero, that is how stupid I am." I felt like it was better to be considered a joker than an inconceivable fool, so I simply said, "perhaps."

"Are you walking your dogs this late at night?"

"I like the night. These triplets also like night. Or at least, more than noon anyways."

"Triplets?" I looked at the dogs at her feet once more. One, two. There were only two, if counting in decimal. "They are a triplet?"

"Yes. Do you hate triplets?"

"No, I love triplets. But, one is missing?"

"One is sick and being looked at – or rather to be honest it's being experimented on," Kasugai-san said without shrugging and without any trace of joking. "These two are waiting their turn. I need them to be healthy so I'm exercising them."

Kasugai Kasuga.

Animal biology, animal psychology, beast molecular biology. While a scientist just the same, unlike Professor Kyouichirou or Utsurigi, Koutari-san or Neo-san, who tackled machinery or physics theory, reason or equations, yes, if anything she is more like the human dissection specialist Kokoromi-sensei, in other words a scientist that specializes in *life forms*. To her, all animals are not pets or objects of affection, but rather just objects of experimentation.

I looked at the two dogs once more. This is probably just a case of my own feelings clouding my views, but the two by Kasugai-san's feet were not just elegant, but they seemed to also be pitiful.

"By the way what did you all come this deep into the mountains to do?" Kasugai-san said still with a lack of intonation. "It does not look like you came here to look at a familiar face nor that you came here to see how the Professor is doing."

"Who knows," I put both my hands in the air and feigned ignorance. "I just came along. You would have to ask Kunagisa herself, because I do not know."

"I think trying to drag Utsurigi-san out of here is an impossible task."

"....."

I paused, with both of my hands up.

"The Professor's obsession over Utsurigi-san is abnormal. Whatever that old man is thinking. And whatever I am to do."

She said, and Kasugai-san turned her back to me, and looked far away. What lay down the path of her sight is, yes, the seventh ward. The research ward that houses Utsurigi Gaisuke.

"..... what research the Professor is doing, Kasugai-san does not know?"

I remembered what Kunagisa said earlier, and asked Kasugai-san.

"Research. Research..." Kasugai seemed to smile lightly at my choice of words. "Is that Professor actually doing research. Maybe he's not doing any research. Because what Professor Kyouichirou's doing is more like war than research. But I might not be able to answer if I were asked what sort of war that is."

"..... huh?"

I did not understand, at all.

Kasugai-san turned her eyes back to me and said, "More importantly."

“To be precise, I don’t know what I’m doing, that’s all. What am I doing here I think as I am being told to do absurd and unreasonable things every day every day without rest like the horse of a horse carriage.”

“You are.”

“I am,” Kasugai-san nodded deeply, in a sagely way. “I am. What in the world is that old man fixated on.”

”.....”

It seemed the topic was heading toward a rather unpleasant direction. Speaking of which, Shito-kun was pretty venomous toward Neo-san, but it seemed like Kasugai-san’s words toward Professor Kyouichirou were not filled with the same sort of malice. Yet it was not like she was complaining or whining. What is this, really.

“Dogs.”

Suddenly, Kasugai-san changed the topic.

“You like dogs?”

”..... not particularly. I do not like or hate. Dogs are animals, right?”

“Yes. There’s an urban legend that animals gravitate toward people who like animals. Considering they gravitate toward me that must be true.”

“Who knows. I have never studied animal psychology.”

“Mmm. Well this field is relatively minor even in the science crowd,” for some reason Kasugai-san smiled in a seductive way at me. I do not understand the meaning. “As a result I am locked up deep in the mountains like this.”

“Locked up...?”

“Oh dear what a slip of the tongue. How careless of me. It appears you have the ability to make other people let down their guard. Anyways please forget what I said boy.”

And then she returned to normal.

“Yes. It seems you have time so let’s pass time talking.”

Just as she said that, Kasugai-san gave some sort of order to the two dogs. They responded promptly, and one went behind Kasugai-san, and another went behind me, and then both *lay down*.

“No need to stand around have a seat boy.”

Said Kasugai-san, and she really sat down on the back of the black dog. That enormous body was indeed a perfect fit to be a sofa, but it was a sight that probably would not rest well with animal rights activists.

”.....”

I turned around, and the black dog behind me was glancing at me in an accusing way. Well, accuse me all you want, what am I supposed to do.

“What’s wrong? Don’t feel modest take a seat. It’s fundamentally a wild animal so it’s soft and comfortable. No worries, that child has a firm body. You don’t particularly like dogs anyways right?”

“No, thank you for your concern, but unfortunately I have an illness where I die in two seconds if I sit on the back of a dog.”

“Mmm. Suit yourself,” Kasugai-san twirled her finger. In response, the dog that was behind me quickly stood up, and then walked to Kasugai-san’s right. And Kasugai-san naturally leaned her elbow on it.

“Everyone seems to dislike this. I think it’s the same as a feather blanket. I guess they’re alright with if it’s dead but not alright if it’s alive.”

“Well, I am simply just afraid of being bitten.”

“Don’t worry. These two haven’t been experimented on yet so they’re gentle. The other one is being experimented on right now so I can’t guarantee safety though. Yes – to be honest I heard about you a number of times from Miyoshi-chan.”

“Huh. That is a frigid thing to hear,” that pervert, better not have said things that should not be told. Unfortunately I am not able to trust Kokoromi-sensei’s loose lips as much as Suzunashi-san. “What sort of things did you hear? From my respected master?”

“Mostly nonsense. But from what I heard from Miyoshi-chan I can’t help but feel like your current actions seem off. You’re trying to help Utsurigi-san – help is the right word I hope – and came all the way here but you’re not the type of kid do to that right?”

“That is a rather frank rudeness... despite my appearances I am pretty active, you know? I write a poem in my journal every day,” I shrugged my shoulders. “However, with regards to *all the way here*, it is as you say. I do not care in the least about helping Utsurigi-san. Kunagisa is the only one thinking that, and Suzunashi-san is intending on staying a neutral party to all of this, and for my part to be direct I really do not care.”

“Mmhmm.”

“And I just did a rescue mission like this last month. It is one thing if I am to rescue a cute girl, but I do not have the intent to do anything wild in

order to help a middle-aged man. I intend to just be an observer, this time."

"Observer. A good word."

Kasugai-san smiled. Completely unlike Kokoromi-sensei, her smile had the full seductive beauty of an adult woman.

"Observer is a good word. Probably the most good of words. Good words never disappear."

Those words spoken lyrically by Kasugai-san stuck with me, but I also felt like some famous foreign movie may be the source material.

"Hey boy. Neo-san and Koutari-san and also Miyoshi-chan all seem convinced that you're Kunagisa Tomo's lover but that's not actually the case right?"

"I finally meet someone who says that," I shrugged my shoulders. "The people here, they all open their mouths and immediately lover this lover that – it was unbearable, honestly. Not just the people here, it seems like most people."

"I don't blame them. When a boy and girl of age are that friendly everyone looks at them through that sort of lens."

"Of age... if you want to go there, Kunagisa's mental maturity is too young, and mine is too old."

"Old. Miyoshi-chan said *his mental maturity is stuck as a middle school sophomore*."

Middle school sophomore – thirteen-years old.

The age that I met Kunagisa Tomo?

Six years ago.

"....."

"But still lovers. A distasteful word. Lovers is a distasteful word. Probably the most distasteful of words. Distasteful words never disappear."

This time it was arranged so that it would be hard to guess the source material.

"It felt like an allotment. Not that I'm saying allotments are bad. What do you think of allotments? Do you support love?"

"Who knows? I have never once liked someone."

"A common line. However well smart people are not well-suited for love for many reasons. It is like a cul de sac of evolution. In that sense I think Professor Kyouichirou is amazing."

”– in what way?”

“At its core talent isn’t mass produced. If anything it’s destructive. You understand being that you were in the ER3 System – geniuses who leave their name in history generally shine their genius in their tens or twenties and then they’re done.”

“Yes – well, yes.”

There were plenty of esteemed people who were recorded in history in their senior appearances; however, the time they could be called a *genius* pure to the word was until they were around thirty, and afterwards they lived off the experience of being a *genius* – in other words, they live the rest of their lives using the leftover crumbs of their genius. It is not that there are no examples of someone spending their whole entire life being a *genius*, but in those cases they simply died young.

The reason why Kunagisa Tomo and Shadou Kyouichirou do not mesh well may be because of that. The conversation with Suzunashi-san on the second floor of the first research ward – I thought of the *difference in generations*. One who was once a *genius* and one who is currently a *genius* – that difference is decisive.

The professor who is shown the genius he once was.

Kunagisa who shows genius that will one day be lost.

Just by living in different eras, is this much difference created between the same ilk?

If so – the man positioned in the middle.

How about, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Is he right now a *genius*?

Or is he a *once was a genius*?

“However despite his age the Professor continues to try to produce. Even if that is production born out of destruction it is still incredible.”

“But even so–”

I almost let slip what Kunagisa had talked about earlier as a retort, but I managed to hold myself back at the last instant. Smiling slightly at my reaction, Kasugai-san tilted her head to the side and said, “mmm this time we both were about to slip our tongues.” She remained as refined as ever.

“It seems we’d be able to enjoy a conversation better without going there so let’s return to the topic. It’s fine that we both agree that you and the Kunagisa girl are not lovers but,” Kasugai-san continued speaking without

pausing. “It looks like you and the Kunagisa girl are not particularly friends either. Because I think that is my deduction incorrect?”

“What a strong opinion... but it would depend on the definition of friend, that.”

“Probably. It was a foolish question to ask without defining,” Kasugai-san nodded slightly. “However to begin with life doesn’t give you that many options anyways. There’re probably six options at the most. Like hate normal – and maybe three more something.”

“Pleasant and unpleasant and indifferent.”

“My. You’re good with words. But that ends up being like rolling a die [3)]. That’s why destined lovers and such are all just sleight of minds. Not that I’d say everything is coincidence or happenstance.”

“I agree about that, for the most part.”

“My my we think alike. I’m a wee bit surprised. But perhaps this is also coincidence?”

“Who knows... even if it is a coincidence, this is not a bad coincidence.”

“Not bad. I might be happy if you’re saying that honestly,” Kasugai-san lightly chuckled. “Six options. I said that without thinking but it has quite the flavor and oddity.”

”..... however, I do not have six options. If I think about it I, from birth to now, feel like I have never once chosen.”

“That might be the same as I.”

Kasugai-san said almost immediately. I looked at her but with doubt, but she still had a plain expression, as if she thought nothing of it.

“Yes. Even in the case that we presume there’re only six options no matter what there exists a seventh. Because I think no matter what the options are you always have the option to *not choose*.”

“Choose to not choose... how psychological (contradictory paradox).”

“Yes. I hate choosing and deciding. Given what Miyoshi-chan said and what I heard earlier it’s probably that. You might be the same way maybe.”

“Indeed, I do have that sort of aspect to me,” I confirmed Kasugai-san’s inquiry. “To be honest, that is the easiest.”

Yes, Kasugai-san nodded.

To not choose.

To not select.

What Professor Kyouichirou's secretary Misachi-san said to me – *I prefer to have no opinion*, that line may be fitting for myself and Kasugai-san.

"Right. I think so too – oh, dear," Kasugai-san stopped abruptly and then stood up from the back of the dog. "– rain."

Told that, I looked up. It seemed the boredom level of the rain clouds had finally reached its limit. Droplets that could be expressed as a drizzle fell through the cracks in the sky. Kasugai-san petted the back of the two dogs one at a time in order.

"It wouldn't be good if these kids caught a cold so I'm going back to my research ward before it starts pouring. There's still a mountain of extremely impossible work left for me to do after all."

"Sounds tough."

"Work must be tough I think. Whether you want to do it or you don't want to do it. You think so too don't you?"

Kasugai-san said, and then she took a step closer. I thought she might be wanting another handshake, but it seemed not, as she took another two steps closer, and then held my head firm with both of her hands. And then she stared at me.

"…..? Kasugai-san? Wha-"

-t is the matter, I wanted to say, but then Kasugai-san stuck out a tongue so long that it did not seem to suit her small mouth, and then with that tongue she **licked** my cheek. The warm, raw living feeling connected directly with my brain.

"…..!"

I instinctively, in a flurry of action that could be called violent, flung Kasugai-san away, and then jumped back about three meters.

"What. Are. You. Doing. Suddenly."

"….. you said you did not mind if a dog did it so I wondered how about a person."

"I absolutely and positively mind."

"I see. Well sorry. I apologize," Kasugai-san apologized nonchalantly. "It's been a while since I met a boy so I couldn't help myself."

Could not help herself what.

"Boy. I might as well ask you now."

"What…"

“Would you like to carry yourself on those two legs to my research ward with me and then into my bedroom and have sex?”

”..... please do not might as well ask such a crazy thing.”

“Is it crazy?”

“It is crazy.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Even if I agree to any sort of play you want?”

”.....”

No, I am not actually pondering that?

However I see, the reason why her enunciation was so clear despite her lack of intonation must have been because of that long tongue. Thinking this would be really bad if this were a precursor to something else, I said, “there are plenty of other men around.”

“Like Koutari-san, or Neo-san.”

“Someone with long hair and someone who’s fat don’t count I think.”

Princess Kasugai nonchalantly said something brutal.

“Then how about Shito-kun? That young boy is like fresh fruit, ripe for picking.”

I tried redirecting.

“Hmmmm. Uze-chan already put her hands on him.”

He was already taken.

“Then Utsurigi-san. He is a pretty good man.”

“Really?” Kasugai-san tilted her head, her interest seemingly piqued. “Utsurigi-san never leaves his research ward so I’ve never seen him. Of course I’ve seen the fruits of his research through mail and such and I’ve felt awed and inspired by them but I’m not perverted enough to sexual lust over information.”

I thought that at the point she tried to lay her hands on a minor she had met for the first time she was already perverted barely, or already barely perverted, but I did not say that.

Hmm, Kasugai-san, she did not seem the way she looked. I thought perhaps people who study too much all end up crazy in some way, but I did not say that either.

“Well think about it anyways please. Well then you should hurry back quickly. It wouldn’t be good if your body broke down this deep in the

mountains. I specialize in animals and Miyoshi-chan specializes in humans but only dead ones, you know. Bye bye."

Kasugai-san bowed her head, and then began walking toward the fourth ward. The two black dogs followed behind her like familiars. It looked not like a walk but more like them being bodyguards, I absent-mindedly thought. I rubbed at the cheek that was licked, and saw off Kasugai-san.

"Hurry back quickly..."

Did that mean to return to the inn, or did that mean return all the way home. The me of now could not determine which. This me, who did not comprehend even one percent of the vastness of this Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility, could not determine which.

Gradually my clothes began to dampen with water. In any case, I need now return to the inn, and I turned on my heel and headed toward the dense forest.

"However, I did not think I would meet Kasugai-san," I spoke to myself while walking through the forest, which was already beginning to look eerie – come to think of it, if I had been gone an hour it would be around three in the morning. "Perhaps this is one type of coincidence..."

The once comrade of Dead Blue, Green Green Green, no matter the reason was working at none other than the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility that just so happened to be funded by the Kunagisa household, and accompanying that Kunagisa Tomo as a friend on the journey was me, and my instructor Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei was working at that research facility as a fellow. Speaking of which, by the time we arrived at this laboratory it was evening, and it had not been even six hours since arriving, that after meeting Kasugai-san just now, I had finished meeting with every face within the facility.

Truly, why do I gravitate toward misfortune.

"..... ahh, I remember now."

My feet stopped, and I froze in the middle of walking under the drizzle.

"That is right... I have not actually met **everyone within the facility** yet....."

One more.

One more, there is a **possibility** that there is another person within this facility. I do not know what sort of number that probability may be, but if there is any possibility whatsoever, then I am not able to not move. If there

is any probability, even if that would be mathematically the equivalent of zero, it does not matter to me.

In the first place, why I left the inn at this hour. It was not just because I was unable to sleep. To meet Kasugai-san? Nonsense. I am not superhuman enough to predict such a coincidence.

Yes.

I left the inn to **confirm**. I remembered that there was one more element of turbulence, and I had stepped outside to confirm that I was not just guessing wrong.

"– now then," I slowly closed my eyes, and then opened my eyes. "Is it the second coming of the human failure.....?"

That **thing** I felt while we were walking to the seventh ward to meet Utsurigi. I still feel it. I still feel it digging into my back. That humid feeling, of being watched from somewhere far away, of being observed from somewhere far away, from being peeped upon from somewhere far away, of being watched over from somewhere far away, that sort of disgusting, unidentifiable feeling. No, it cannot even be called a feeling, as it is more like a muddy, muddy mood.

That is a look.

"**Come out...** ***Mr. Intruder.*** Or should I call you Zerozaki Itoshiki?" I mumbled. "If you keep running and hiding like that, your manliness will go down."

"I never particularly bother with **sneaking, running or hiding**."

Right behind me.

In the literal sense, **she** was right behind me. A few millimeters, no, a few microns was the distance, as she stood behind me. She existed right behind me, in that incredibly small space where I still would not hear her breath or even the beating of her heart.

".....——"

This – this close.

To not realize even when she was in a position of such closeness that she definitively controlled my life or death. I was hoping to surprise her by suddenly calling out *you looking at me, wherever you are*, but it felt like my heart had just been gouged out in return. I could not jump away, or even turn around. Or even, I was so stunned that my body locked up. To confirm

her appearance, basically all I could do was wait for her to walk all the way around in front of me.

Denim pants and leather, laced boots that seemed too cool for a lady to wear. She had a rough shirt covering her upper body. And then above them, she wore a denim jacket that seemed to be made of the same material as her pants that also had long sleeves. She had long hair, and they were braided on both sides of her head. Presumably her glasses served no actual function, and of course a denim hunting cap. The cap was too deep, and so I could not see her eyes.

My body trembled. No, my body did not even tremble. There was not even a will to fight. There was not even any fear. There was no shock or confusion or terror. I was terribly calm. I was forced to be terribly calm. This feeling, this feeling of déjà vu. This feeling, of opposing that Mankind's Strongest.

The rain began falling heavier and heavier. It was becoming difficult to confirm what lay ahead of me. It seemed it was beginning to pour. But that did not matter right now. Such a thing was completely irrelevant to the current situation. Compared to this feeling, if it were to continue raining like this forever, it would still be a trivial problem.

"*Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility–" she spoke first, with a light tone of voice that was ill-suited to the setting. "– in any case, the condition of this place is just like that of a graveyard to which the dead flock."

"....."

"Do you not think that there are few things as unbecoming as the dreams of an elder? Do you not think that the sight of an elder who's envious of a mere child is one that screams of patheticness? Like an apparition that clings to the world after death – so unseemly and pathetic and sad and wretched and self-interested and pitiful and piddling and pitiable that I cannot stand to watch."

"....."

I could not react. I was completely smothered.

And to my state, she smiled and said, "Yet however, this rain is well is it not?" and then pulled her brim back down over her eyes, and then like a forest faerie – creepily laughed.

“As though it hints at the path you will take, what a fantastic rain. Fufu, this is itself consummate.”

”– you,”

“I present to you my real name, Ishimaru Kouta – pleased to be your acquaintance, from thenceforth.”

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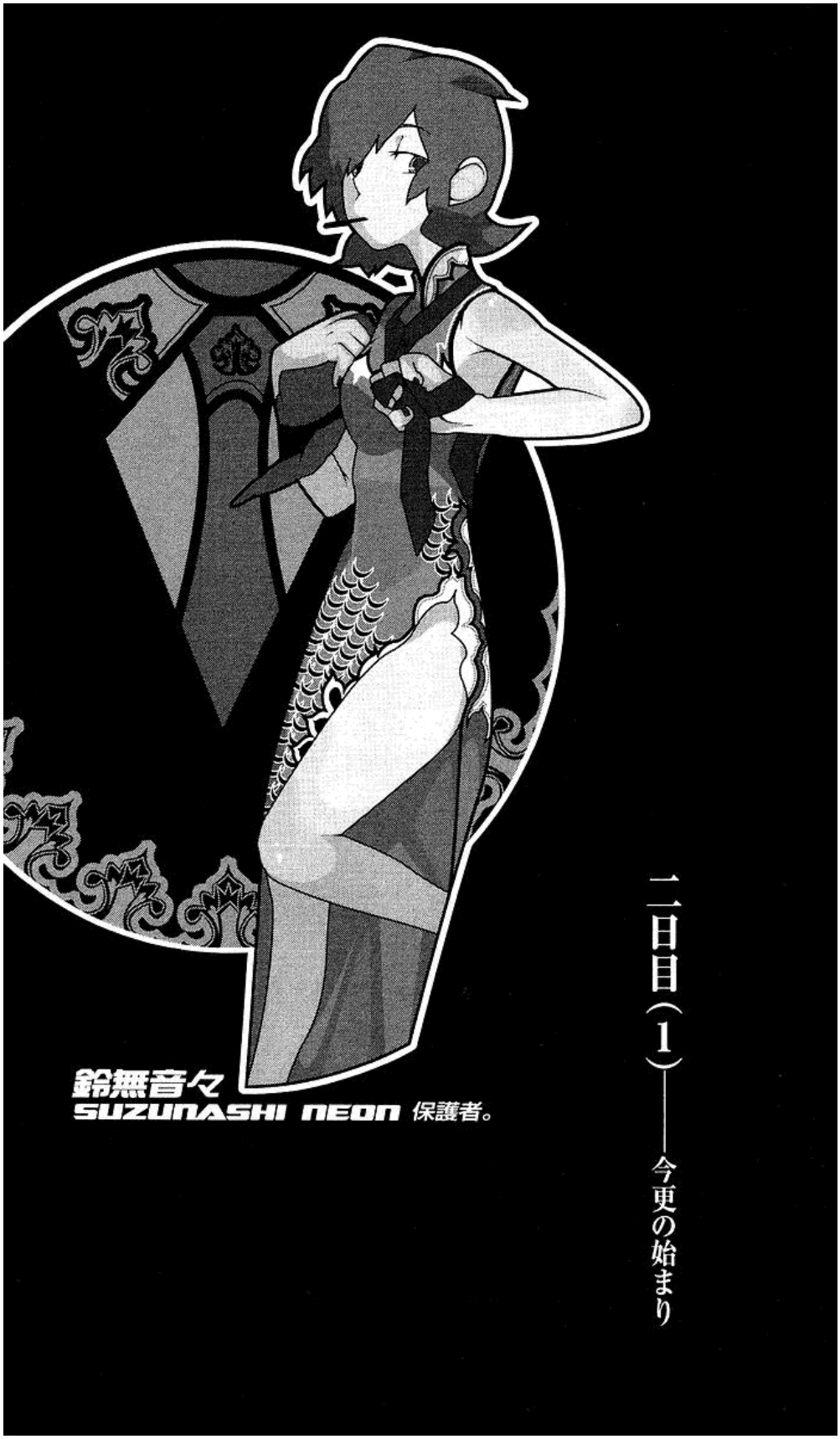
[1] Super Abnormal Human Construct Research

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seppuku

[3] note that a die in Japanese is サイコロ or saikoro. Say that aloud, then look back at the title of this volume/arc again.



二日目（1）——今更の始まり

Day 2 (1)

The Beginning, Belatedly

0

The way a person looks is not the way they are.

The way a person looks is just the way they are selected.

1

It appeared it stopped raining while I was sleeping.

Six o'clock in the morning.

There were still a lot of clouds in the sky, and the sun coming up was iffy. However, at the very least there was enough light to be able to make out the horizon with my naked eye. I was standing on the roof of the inn, alone, and letting the wind have its way with me. It sounded cool to say that I was letting the wind have its way with me, but the reality was that I was just slowly letting my drowsiness escape.

There were a number of puddles on the tiled roof. I nonsensically tried stepping in one. Obviously, water splashed every which way. My shoes and pant sleeves became wet. I looked at that for a bit, but eventually I grew bored, and lifted my foot from the puddle.

"– die."

I mumbled, and suddenly, with my left hand, I pulled out the knife from the hidden holster in my jacket. The thin, really so thin that you would think you could see through it, knife that a doctor might even use for tiny surgeries. Just swinging it lightly gave me the delusion of cutting air.

I continued to swing a second, third time. This was an imitation of Miiko-san, something like a multi-directional swing. There was nothing in

particular for me to cut, but just swinging the blade gave me the refreshing feeling of clearing up something in my heart.

"– wow, Aikawa-san," I stopped and mumbled. "This blade is really something."

Did even that human failure have a blade like this. It may be difficult to land a fatal wound given that it is a knife with a short blade, but this lightness, and this ease of use was a marvel of its own sort. It was like a contemporary version of ornamental knives. Come to think of it, it was the first time I had actually swung it since Aikawa-san had given it to me as a present, but I thought it might indeed come in handy if such a situation were to arise, and I nodded to myself, and tried to return the knife to the holster.

And, then, I came to the thought that there was no need to use the knife with my left hand. I am not left-handed nor right-handed. If I must compare, my left arm simply has a bit more strength. However, because the strength of the knife is its quickness, there was no need to use it with my left hand. In fact, perhaps the knife should be used in my right hand as a support? There are more right-handed people, after all. As such, the fact that the knife pocket in the holster was designed for left-handed use, and that it was intended to be placed on the right side of my body, would prove that this knife was designed for that role, would it not?

Knives – well, not just knives, but any weapon, when held, draw peoples' attention. This is of course the case for the one being attacked, but it is the same for the attacker. If you flip that around, it means that people think if you handle the weapon then you are safe.

What I speak of is variation.

This knife is splendid, but it would be bad to rely on it. I thought that, and took off my jacket, flipped the holster, placed the knife back in, and then put the jacket back on.

"– either way, this is still just to make myself feel better....."

Or perhaps for recreation.

I cannot deny that there is a bit of self-deprecation in that admission. The abnormality of this research facility was already enough to dampen my mood, but to add to that, there was Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei, and then and then, Ishimaru Kouta.....

Hmm, Ishimaru Kouta.....

To be honest, when I accepted the knife from Aikawa-san, I thought there would not be an occasion to need it, and even if there were to be such an occasion, I thought it would still be useless in my hands, but, maybe it was still better to have it around to make myself feel better than to not have it at all.

"– quite a dangerous hobby, Inoji. Instead of a Fallen Indulgence, are you going for a Bladed Indulgence?"

Suddenly, a voice spoke to me from behind, and I turned around in surprise. I figured who it was based on voice and way of talking, but in any case there was Suzunashi-san. She had apparently still not changed, and was still wearing a china dress. Perhaps she had just awakened, as she had black-framed glasses on instead of contact lenses.

"..... good morning, Suzunashi-san. You were awake?"

"I've been friends with the sun since I was born. I wake up pretty early, you know. Yes, good morning, Inoji," Suzunashi-san smiled somewhat sarcastically. "Knife-training in the morning? Are you trying to get into some foreign force? Inoji, I can introduce you to some people, if you want."

"I will pass," I moved toward the fence around the roof, as if escaping from Suzunashi-san. "I just wanted to move around a bit. Morning exercise is important. You know, I am almost twenty, right? I need to get a workout before the exhaustion built-up over my teen years catches up to me."

"I can help out if you want to train. I can be a sparring partner, too," Suzunashi-san said, appearing to not be joking. "So? Where's Ao-chan?"

"..... it is not like we are always a set. Although it seems everyone misunderstands. You know, Kunagisa is usually cooped up, right? And on top of that she lives in Shirosaki. We actually have a low encounter rate."

"Well, yeah, when it comes to encounter rates you probably run into Asano way more often. Being neighbors and all."

Suzunashi-san said that and then stretched. Based on that, it appeared she had not come to the roof because of me, but rather simply because she wanted to exercise and stretch herself.

After completing a set of flexibility exercises, Suzunashi-san began smoking. And then she said, "Hey, Inoji."

"I read an interesting book when I was being an elementary school student. I've read countless books in my life, but that was the only book I

ever found interesting."

"Huh. What sort of book?"

"Yes. If you're asking what was interesting, it was a mystery novel, but despite having about five hundred pages, the latter half of it was blank. I was surprised, I didn't see that twist coming."

"It was a misprint."

"But it was interesting. It was really surprising," Suzunashi-san took out a lighter and then lit the cigarette. She made it look really cool, but her china dress ruined the cool-ness. "..... but that goes for movies, too, not just books. If you know its length is two hours, then you can always deduce where you are in the movie. If you're one hour into the movie, you're at around the one-hour mark, but if you're in the last five minutes you're probably watching the climax. There's a level of comfort there. A movie ending short wouldn't happen unless it's a broken film or something."

"So are you trying to get at... life is different, Suzunashi-san?"

"Close, but not exactly."

Suzunashi-san offered me a cigarette and asked, "Smoke?" but I shook my head and declined.

"In other words... for example, if you're watching a Hollywood movie, and the heroine actress doesn't show up an hour into the film, or there's no hijacking or building hijacking, or aliens or anything, do you think that'd ever happen?"

"Never."

"Reading a mystery novel, and you finish reading half the pages but no one's killed, and the detective hasn't even shown up yet, would you be able to call that a mystery novel?"

"Never."

"But in that sense, life is different," Suzunashi-san repeated my line. "**Something should be happening soon**, or, **things should be wrapping up soon**, or, that sort of premonition... or more like, measurement doesn't exist. So, now that we've gotten to that point, I'll get to the point I wanted to get to, which is, Inoji. What are you intending to do with Ao-chan?"

"..... intending to do? What do you mean? That is rather abrupt," I tilted my head to the side, acting like I did not understand what was meant. "I have no intentions or anything of the sort."

“You have university and yet you tagged along all the way over here, and picked a fight with Sir Utsurigi and Sir Kyouichirou... what are you doing?”

“That is a very fundamental question, but I do not know that either. I do not even want to think about what I am doing. Or, Suzunashi-san, are you able to put a reason to everything you do?”

“I may not be able to put a reason but I’m also not being paradoxical. Don’t mistake reason and paradox, Inoji. Hahah, perhaps that was a difficult way to put it? ..... Inoji, I can’t believe that a boy wouldn’t want to hug the girl he likes if she’s right there in front of him.”

”.....”

I could not even back-channel at Suzunashi-san’s words.

“Of course, that’s your own business, Inoji, but your life isn’t continuing forever. I think you should let other people take care of things sometimes. Otherwise you’ll miss out on a lot.”

”..... you make it sound like I am distrustful of people.”

“You are. Absolutely distrustful. You’ve never once believed someone, have you? But you know, for example, Inoji, I like you. Asano too, can’t help but find you cute. That’s why she came to me and begged me to chaperon you two. I don’t think it needs to be stated that Ao-chan, too, loves Inoji. You understand that at least, don’t you?”

“Shito-kun and Utsurigi also... like and hate and such, we are not children you know.”

I know I should not even be retorting. I know that Suzunashi-san is correct. However I could not help but retort. No, this was not even a retort, it was just – exactly, like a sulking a child.

“Just because they like the other person, where is the guarantee that they would never betray them? It is not that hard to become friends with someone you hate. Really, can you stop with that? Always talking about liking and hating just leads to unpleasantness.”

“It’s not food, so I think it’s fine to talk about liking and hating, I think.”

“It is the same as food. Human relations. People who are sensible about it find it delicious.”

“I can’t believe you actually think that,” Suzunashi-san did not fall for the taunt. With correctness, as if dealing with a combative child, she spoke to me slowly. “Just a thought, but have you ever spat out how you actually feel in your life? Umm. That, was it called nonsense or something?”

”.....”

“I think – you can, say what you want, a bit more, don’t you think?”

”..... I will say nothing. I am a silent character, after all.”

“If you want. Is that so is that so. I see, so that’s your defensive wall. Or perhaps just your last shred of pride? Then what a cheap wall of pride. You might be thinking that you’re tricking people with that, but actually you look pretty silly, just so you know.”

“Can you please just let it go,” I kept my eyes off Suzunashi-san as I spoke. “I am not in the mood to listen to Suzunashi-san’s lectures. My stomach is quite full, thank you. So much so that if I were to lean one way I would probably start leaking it all over the place. There is a lot for me to think about.”

“A lot, eh... like Ao-chan, like yourself, like Ao-chan, like yourself, I assume?”

“Is that wrong?”

“I won’t say it’s wrong. I just won’t say it, but I do think it’s wrong. And you know, you should take a look outside for once, you know? The way you are now, you’re just like the researchers here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Putting up a wall all around like this, and no one knows what they’re doing inside. You know, Inoji. I’ll be honest, we – by which I mean us ordinary people that aren’t any special species like you and Ao-chan, and Professor Kyouichirou and Sir Utsurigi, we’re scared of **things that we don’t know**. Because, we don’t know.”

Scared of things that are unknown.

The fear that Professor Kyouichirou holds with regards to Kunagisa – does that fall under that?

”..... it is a survival instinct to fear the unknown. That is nothing to fret over.”

“But you like **things that you don’t know**, right? You absolutely love situations that aren’t clear, that’re vague and half-assed, don’t you?”

Attracted to the unknown.

The worship that Utsurigi Gaisuke holds with regards to Kunagisa – does that fall under that?

“I am not particularly... anything like that.”

“You should try to get better at lying. You might be able to dupe other people, but that doesn’t work on me.”

“Monks-in-training say different things.”

“I’m already a monk. I don’t need to do training, because there’s no need. Anyways, you like the vague unknown. That’s probably why you’re placing yourself in such a vague position... but you know, even if it’s just a little, don’t you think you could tag along with us?”

“I have been doing so,” I said. “But you know, I have limits, too. It seems like everyone and anyone harbors some sort of expectations from me, and of course I would love to meet their expectations, too, but I cannot meet expectations if I lack the capability. So to have someone say *you failed my expectations* is nothing but bothersome.”

“What really is that half-hearted desire to interact with people?” Suzunashi-san suddenly said. “Hating people yet still wanting to be by people, goes beyond the selfishness of people who can meld into society, I think anyways.”

”– what?”

“If you really think they’re annoying, you can just become a mountain hermit like me. It’d be easy for you wouldn’t it? You’d be able to live just fine alone. Pessimists should just be as pessimistic as a pessimist, and go away somewhere. Don’t think of me as cold just because I say that, though. But, people who can live alone, might as well live alone. Strong people all do that, you know?”

“Is that why you do not see strong people very often. An amusing theory. Quite a leap, but not paradoxical, I see, amusing,” I nodded with contempt. “However, I am a weak person. I am a coward that hates people.”

“Inoji. For crying out loud, can you stop with that?”

Suzunashi-san slid past my words.

”– what do you mean by, stop with that?”

“Making it sound like you’re faulty and that no one else is. What’s the merit in acting like you’re incapable? Do you enjoy self-deprecation? I don’t like that way of thought, either. Inoji, I’m tired of talking about this, so come here.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Punch you.”

There is no idiot that would hear that and walk over. I stood in place, and put up both my hands as an answer to Suzunashi-san. She saw that and then said, "Alright, alright."

"I won't punch you, so come over here."

I heard that, felt relieved, and walked over.

She punched me.

"..... that hurt."

"Punch things that're broken to fix them."

"My head hurts from all the things to think about already... please spare me."

"Mmhmm. Your head hurts?"

She pulled my hair.

"Don't worry. It's just a scratch."

"....."

"Here."

Suzunashi-san said as she let go of me, and then punched my cheek again. It was not that strong of a punch. I staggered back two or three steps, and then stopped.

"At the very least, you don't seem that weak to me."

"..... what you think of me is your own business."

"That's why I'm saying what I please. You can live alone. You're strong enough. You're strong enough at least to not need to cling to others. ..... but, on the other hand, there's an actual problem, which is that I think you could get along with people better than you do now, you know? You said *I have been doing so* just now, but – you know the truth, don't you? About that sort of stuff."

"....."

"It just looks to me like you're failing on purpose."

In April, surrounded by geniuses.

In May, tagging along with classmates.

In June, confronting a high school girl.

Every time, I failed.

But were those failures really unavoidable? Or perhaps had I actually known everything, and despite all that, chosen the wrong path?

Afraid of success, afraid of triumph.

And then, July.

In the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility–

Do I intend to fail?

”….. I am going to wake Kunagisa up.”

I said, and then turned my back on Suzunashi-san, as if escaping. Suzunashi-san did not stop me. She probably thought it was enough. And that was, the way it was.

It was enough, of gouging through me.

“Jeez…..”

That person really loves lecturing. However, they say I am a masochist who loves being lectured, so that may be more of an issue.

I arrived at Kunagisa’s room, and knocked on the door. However, there was no response. She was probably still asleep. Last night she slept fairly early (for Kunagisa), but she was probably tired from the long trip. Kunagisa did not have much stamina.

I opened the door without making a sound and entered the room. As expected, Kunagisa was sleeping on top of the bed. She had terrible sleeping form, and half of the blanket had fallen off the bed. She was sleeping with a carefree face, with an expression of complete defenselessness. I thought, what a truly happy person.

A happy person.

A happy person.

However, is she happy?

I walked to the side of the bed, and crouched. I carefully extended by hand, and touched Kunagisa’s blue hair. It was an action that did not particularly have meaning, but in any case, I did that. And then I played with the hair for a bit, and then, moved my fingers to Kunagisa’s cheek.

”….. come to think of it, Utsurigi had said something similar about me.”

However.

However, Suzunashi-san.

You do not know everything about me. What sort of *secrets that cannot be told* I carry, she does not know. How twisted a person I am, how abysmally sinful a person I am, she does not know. I do not want to be lectured by someone who does not know, and I do not want people to know anyways.

After all, what I do not trust is not other people, it is myself.

“Truly a melancholy… I am. Gosh, is this guy alright…”

I mumbled, as if I were someone else, and then I moved my fingers to Kunagisa's lips. I turned my fingers, as if caressing the lips. And then after thinking something, I moved my hands, this time, to her throat. I touched the maxillary artery, and felt the beat of Kunagisa Tomo's life, and then.

And then, I slapped Kunagisa's cheek.

"Uni...? Nini," Kunagisa seemed to have awakened. "..... huh. Ii-chan. Ukh? ..... mornink."

"Mornink."

I slapped Kunagisa's cheek once more, and said, "it's morning."

"Huh... already? I feel like I only slept five minutes," Kunagisa rubbed her eyes. "That's odd. I feel like I haven't slept at all lately."

"Your exhaustion is probably catching up. Because you keep forcing your crummy body to work. Want to go on a trip somewhere once, without needing to do anything? Like a vacation, right, like over to Mongolia. Not a violent place like this."

"That might be a good idea... but I'd never do it, because it sounds tiring."

Kunagisa slid off the bed and said "tie my hair." I nodded, and pulled off the black rubber band around my wrist, and began gathering Kunagisa's somewhat long hair together. Her hair had grown longer since we had reunited, though I do not know if Kunagisa ever cuts her hair.

"Tomo, do you not cut your hair?"

"Mmm. If I do, Ii-chan wouldn't be able to tie my hair anymore. That'd be lonely," Kunagisa puckered her lips and said. "But it'll get really hot soon."

"Your room always has air conditioning running..." I said, and then remembered. "Speaking of which, Professor Kyouichirou and the Utsurigi guy both mentioned it, but did you change your hairstyle?"

"Hmm? Ahh, yeah. I did."

"Hmm..."

Kunagisa met Professor Kyouichirou seven years ago. And she last saw Utsurigi two years ago. However, when I met her again, Kunagisa had seemed the same as she had always been. Then, what sort of journey had Kunagisa's hairstyle taken?

"Alright. Ponytail done."

"Thanku. Is boku-sama-chan cute?"

“Cute, cute.”

“Fall in love again?”

“Fall in love again, fall in love again.”

“Boku-sama-chan love?”

“Love love.”

I answered twice each, and then said, “Alright, shall we have breakfast?”

“Let’s eat first and then think of some ideas.”

“Right,” Kunagisa nodded, and she stood up. “Yup. And about which to persuade–”

“Which?” I asked back. “Do you mean, which of Utsurigi or Professor Kyouichirou?”

“Yup. Because problems need to be solved one at a time, in any case. Which do you think would be easier to persuade, Ii-chan?”

A difficult question. I felt like both were the same sort of problem, yet I also felt like they were completely different. I thought for a while, and then answered, “From a simplicity standpoint, Professor Kyouichirou, probably.”

“That Utsurugi looks like he takes things lightly, but he is quite stubborn. Or perhaps less stubborn and more selfish. He might put up a good fight with you for who is more selfish. You both only do what you think, and only say what you think. You both act like nothing other than yourself matters. I do not know why he is so obstinate about this, but in that sense I feel like Professor Kyouichirou might have more room for discussion?”

“Well you’re right about Sacchan, aside from the point about boku-sama-chan being selfish. Ii-chan’s gotten better at evaluating people. But Ii-chan, that’s still just an *if push comes to shove* standpoint, because I think Professor Kyouichirou isn’t that simple, either. Remember what I said last night? The masterpiece that one esteemed scientist has built-up over an entire, proud, life – maybe masterpiece would be overstating it, but leaving that aside I think trying to get someone to bend their…”

“I did not mean from just a relative, comparative point. There is a way. A way that would reach Professor Kyouichirou but would not reach Utsurigi. For example, right, you could ask Nao-san.”

“Ahh… I see,” Kunagisa nodded after a pause. “I see….. cut off the financial root? Then of course the Professor would have to release

Sacchan... is that what you mean?"

"You do not need to be that overt. You just need to threaten. That would be effective enough, would it not?"

After all, allowing three outsiders into a facility where such secretive work is being performed would normally never be allowed. Even so, that the Professor allowed Kunagisa's **invasion** also expressed the Professor's fear of the Kunagisa house, I thought.

Of course, it would be impossible to cut off funding for this research laboratory just by asking Nao-san – Kunagisa Nao. That was coming from a large stream that I would not be able to even imagine, and even the secretary of the CEO, Nao-san, would not be able to do anything about it, and Nao-san is not a kind-enough person to bring his own emotions into work anyways. I am not calling him heartless, but he was not one that felt much attachment to anything.

However, this sort of threat is one that is **effective only because it will never be done**.

"There are other means without borrowing Nao-san's power. Chii-kun – well no, he is on bad terms with Utsurigi so that would not work. Let us assume that Hii-chan would be impossible, too. Even so, *Cracking* is not just Utsurigi's field of expertise, right? You could do it too if you wanted, like you used to, right? Then you could threaten something like you would *destroy the results of this research facility if Utsurigi Gaisuke is not **fired***. That would work, too. Given the content of research, there is probably a network connection to this facility despite its location in the mountains, after all. A small – no, no matter the size, the Professor probably knows full well that a wall is meaningless in front of *Team*."

"Hmm. I see..... but those all sound pretty underhanded."

"Not up for it?"

"Nope, that's not what I mean. I just thought Ii-chan wasn't the type to bring that stuff up."

"I am underhanded. Fundamentally," I lightly nodded. "You should have known that from long ago, right?"

"That's not what I mean. I meant it's rare for Ii-chan to show that underhanded side to boku-sama-chan."

"Huh... really."

"Did something happen last night?"

Kunagisa asked me while looking at me not with an accusing look but more of a blank look. She was very astute in times of astuteness. And that was made worse by the lack of any logic to it. I shook my head and said, "Not really."

"However, I have university and part-time work, so I just want to get this over as smoothly and quickly as possible. That is all. That is all and everything."

"Hmm. Sounds like a lie," Kunagisa gave me a suspicious, peering look. "Ii-chan lies like breathing. Friends that you can't believe when you want to believe them are such a pain."

"Really. I am not lying."

"Whatever, anyways. I'll believe Ii-chan even if it's a lie."

"..... well, in any case those were ultimatums..... or more like last resorts. We would have to confront the Professor head on before relying on the Kunagisa household or former *Team* members, after all. Tactically, I would not be able to call it sound."

And the biggest problem would be whether it would be possible to out-bluff Professor Kyouichirou anyways. Kunagisa being Kunagisa is useless when it comes to negotiations and compromising, just an obstacle that is useless in every way. In that case, the task would fall on the User of Nonsense, but in this case the wild cards I hold are too few. It would be like trying to bluff without exchanging any cards against someone with a Full House. Even the most favorable of estimates would give me a thirty-five percent chance of winning. In other words, it would be like the best of major league batters. From that perspective it would sound like it was not that bad of an odd, but realistically, no one would ever charge into a conflict with those odds.

"Yup. Let's talk to Neon-chan about that stuff, too."

"Sounds good."

I placed a hand on Kunagisa, and then left her room. I went straight to Suzunashi-san's room, but when I opened the door after knocking, I was surprised by what I saw.

There were three people in the room.

One was of course Suzunashi-san. She had already changed out of her china dress and back into her dark suit. It seemed she had also swapped the

glasses for contact lenses. She was leaning against the wall with a troubled expression.

One of the other two I recognize. However, it was still an unexpected face to see here – it was Neo-san who was sitting on the bed. However right now, he did not have that mocking feel to him, as he also had a troubled expression.

”.....?”

And the other, this was a face I had never seen before. Bald... or rather, a complete skin-head, with black sunglasses that seem more fitting in a Chinese mafia movie. He had a handsome face but his hairstyle (for lack of a better word) and complete lack of facial expression was enough to cause me to become wary. He was somewhat tall. His posture was like an actor in a historical drama. Given that he was wearing a lab coat, he must be a researcher, however...

”..... huh...?”

I had already met with every researcher last night. Then who is this bald man? Who in the world is he? Assuming there is no mistake in Chii-kun’s information. Who is this man naturally sitting next to Neo-san.

“Good morning.”

It was Neo-san who greeted me as I stood at the door.

“Were you able to sleep well last night?”

”..... yes.... although I would not say it was the most comforting,” I hesitantly nodded. ”– well, enough so that I would not cause worry.”

“That is good. And, at a good time–” fufu, Neo-san chuckled. However that was not said with that mocking tone, but rather an unshakably heavy tone. “I was about to call you just now. Right, Koutari-san?”

“I don’t know.”

The mysterious handsome that answered curtly.

Wait, just now, Neo-san–

“Koutari-san?”

I could not help but point. That mysterious handsome looked at that with displeasure, and said, “Yes.”

“What. Something about me?”

”.....”

I took a step back. And then I ran into Kunagisa, who was standing behind me. Kunagisa was not able to see inside the room, so she just made

an odd animal-like yelp, “Uryu?”

Koutari Hinayoshi-san. He used to be covered in hair and mustache like some monster that appears in novels. Even I was unable to retrain my surprise at this situation.

”..... why? Huh? Wait what wait what wait what. Umm..... sorry, I am confused.”

“You’re the one who said to cut my hair.”

Koutari-san said with his low voice. That complete lack of emotion definitely pointed to being him, despite not looking anything remotely like him. He cut all of that scruffy, long hair – no, shaved, and even shaved his mustache. Was that because of what I said?

“What other reason would there be,” Koutari-san answered curtly. “Take responsibility for your words.”

”.....”

Wah.....

I did not mean it that way...

While caught off-guard, I said, “That suits you better. You look awesome.” Of course, even if it were not so, I have not thrown away enough of my humanity to be able to say, “Nevermind, you looked better the way you were before. It is a shame you cut it all.” Koutari-san did not react at all to my praise, and simply looked away in silence.

I glanced at Suzunashi-san, who was looking at me with a “see what you’ve done” expression. Indeed, I have no words to return.

“Hahah. Well well, quite a surprise,” Neo-san slapped his hands together, and said. “That Koutari-san had such a handsome face. They say that women transform when they cut their hair, but for that to apply to us men as well. Truly a surprise, this morning. Rightly astonishing. Perhaps if I were to become bald I might turn out to be handsome, too.”

“Of course not.”

The conversation between the two was the same as always. Except that Neo-san continued this time in a dark tone, ”... really, if it were not for the situation at hand, I would be laughing.”

”..... the situation at hand?” I repeated Neo-san’s words. “What do you mean by the situation at hand. Did something happen?”

“Good intuition, overseas student from the ER Program,” Neo-san said. “I was just talking to this beautiful lady about that.”

I looked at Suzunashi-san again. She nodded, “that’s how it was.”

“Inoji. It seems... well I don’t know how to put it, but some troublesome stuff happened.”

“Troublesome stuff.”

What does that mean. *Troublesome stuff* that would cause Neo-san and Koutari-san to walk all the way to the inn this early in the morning meant that this had to do with either Professor Kyouichirou or Utsurigi... no, maybe it was about last night? Maybe someone had seen it. I thought, and placed a hand to my cheek.

”.....”

No, I am not talking about when I was **licked** by Kasugai-san.

“Yup,” Suzunashi-san nodded. “Remember that incident that caused you and Asano to become friends right after you moved in during February? Like that. .... no, even **worse**.”

”..... **even worse**?”

I could not even begin to fathom a situation like that.

I looked back at Neo-san.

Neo-san exhaled deeply, and then stood up from the bed.

“Well, they do say seeing is better than hearing... let’s head to the seventh ward,” Neo-san walked past me, scratching his head. “Today was the first time I went in there, but... this sort of first. I wonder if this is karma or something.”

“Seventh ward... did something happen to–”

I began to say, but Neo-san seemed to have regained some of his earlier flamboyancy, for he said with an exaggerated expression, “In short.”

“We have very distressing news to relay to you.”

2

That spectacle was just like the worshiping of some divinity.

I had seen this countless times.

I had seen this sort of spectacle countless times. I had seen this sort of spectacle, that causes your nerves to numb and your thoughts to freeze, countless times. Last month and last last month and the month before that, I had seen this. However, even so this rattled me. The spectacle, which caused neither a drop of admiration nor a drop of of excitement, lay sprawled out in the room.

– or should I say was scattered.

This was clearly a work of art designed to be shown to someone.

A work of art designed to be shown.

”– Utsurigi, Gaisuke.....”

Utsurigi’s body was crucified to the white wall.

Like a pariah, was a comparison that I could not make. No matter what, this could not be seen in the same light as that sort of lukewarm thing. There was no meaning to describing this with words. It was just a massacred corpse. It was nothing but a massacred corpse. How, how is one supposed to compare such an absolute thing?

”.....”

Both eyes, those, laughing, and sharp, almost fanged set of eyes, were already gone. In the sockets which ordinarily house them were instead stainless steel scissors. The blades of the scissors, which were half-open, were spread horizontally, in both sockets. They were in almost to the handle, so forget the retinal muscles, the blades were almost certain through to the brain.

Even that was enough to prove a lack of life, but that was not the end.

First, the mouth.

In the haphazardly opened, in the mouth that was haphazardly opened such that it was clear it was not opened to breath life, was a knife that could only be described as brusque. A brusque knife that made the knife

sitting near by the chest look like a toy that was stabbed through . It was deeply thrust like the scissors in the eye sockets, and it pierced through the back of the throat and even into the wall behind. That was the lynchpin of Utsurigi's crucifixion.

And the chest.

As if on receiving heart surgery, the muscles and ribs were cut open. Human insides were visible from **there**. A scene glimpsed through that made people instinctively want to turn away. Made people re-acknowledge that people are clumps of meat and blood. Just flesh bags crammed with raw stuff.

Stomach.

The cut from the heart went to around the belly button. As such, internal organs that were liberated from the cramped flesh bag, the intestines, spilled out from there. Muddled and slimy. The light-black vessels of blood poked out as if they craved attention. The pungent odor reached all the way across the room. At the very least, even children who hate vegetables would not be able to eat meat for a while after seeing this. Would not be able to eat livers. Disgust preceded fear.

Both legs.

They were **snapped and cracked** to the point where no one can discern the original shape. Bones were sticking out here and there and it was unbearable. That was not all the damage, as the same, thick knives as found in the mouth bore through the thighs. Around the center of the thighs. In other words, that was not just slicing muscle, but also crushing through bone. The lynchpin in the mouth, and two more through both legs. As such, Utsurigi's body looked to be floating.

Crucified.

Bloodied Utsurigi Gaisuke.

White hair, and the orange-colored sunglasses at his feet, and then lab coat drenched red **each and everything** signified that, because it was hard to say Utsurigi Gaisuke's body kept any resemblance.

And what made **that** even more bizarre.

That body **lacked both arms**. As if torn off by something, they were missing from the shoulder. That made Utsurigi look even more unbalanced, even more unnatural, and the lab coat sleeves simply hanging limp awakened even more eeriness.

It was preposterous. Truly preposterous.

Before thinking this to be vicious or inhumane, one was left not understanding what the point of this action, what the meaning of this spectacle was. A dismembered body was far more comforting. To destroy, destroy, and then destroy a person's body to this extent, what meaning could there be?

Crucified.

The entire floor of the room was stained red. It did not need explanation that it was Utsurigi's blood. Some parts were already drying, and becoming black from oxidation. It was a terrible spectacle, as if every ounce of blood that had been inside Utsurigi's body had leaked out.

However, more than that floor, everyone's eyes gravitated toward Utsurigi's half-destroyed body and – the wall behind him. On that white backdrop wall. That wall that was already white.

Had **words written in blood**.

Enormous letters, as if the final set of ornamentation to Utsurigi Gaisuke's body, as if the final work to decorating this spectacle, spelled out a sentence in blood.

Of course that was not a message from the dead. Clearly, the suspect who had created this spectacle – yes, it was a message from the suspect.

It was difficult to read here and there, but the meaning could be understood. It was written in English.

You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!

"……"

『Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo.』

I.

I looked at Kunagisa. I looked at Kunagisa, standing beside me.

However, however I, froze.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Looked at the sight in front of her eyes.

With her former comrade, the friend she had come here to save, the human being she had just reunited with yesterday, crucified in front of her. With her eyes reflecting Utsurigi Gaisuke, *Green Green Green*, crucified to the wall with both eyes pierced and mouth gouged and chest opened and stomach gashed and legs stabbed and arms ripped off. Reading the message left for her by the suspect.

And laughed.

Kunagisa Tomo was laughing.

Happily. As if she had encountered what she had desired. As if she had just gotten what she wanted. Without any trace of innocence, without any piece of joy, an indescribable smile.

As if spellbound by that spectacle.

As if comforted by that spectacle.

As if enraptured by that spectacle.

It was definitely a Kunagisa Tomo I did not know.

A *Dead Blue* I did not know.

I did not know this thing.

When it was speaking to Professor Kyouichirou.

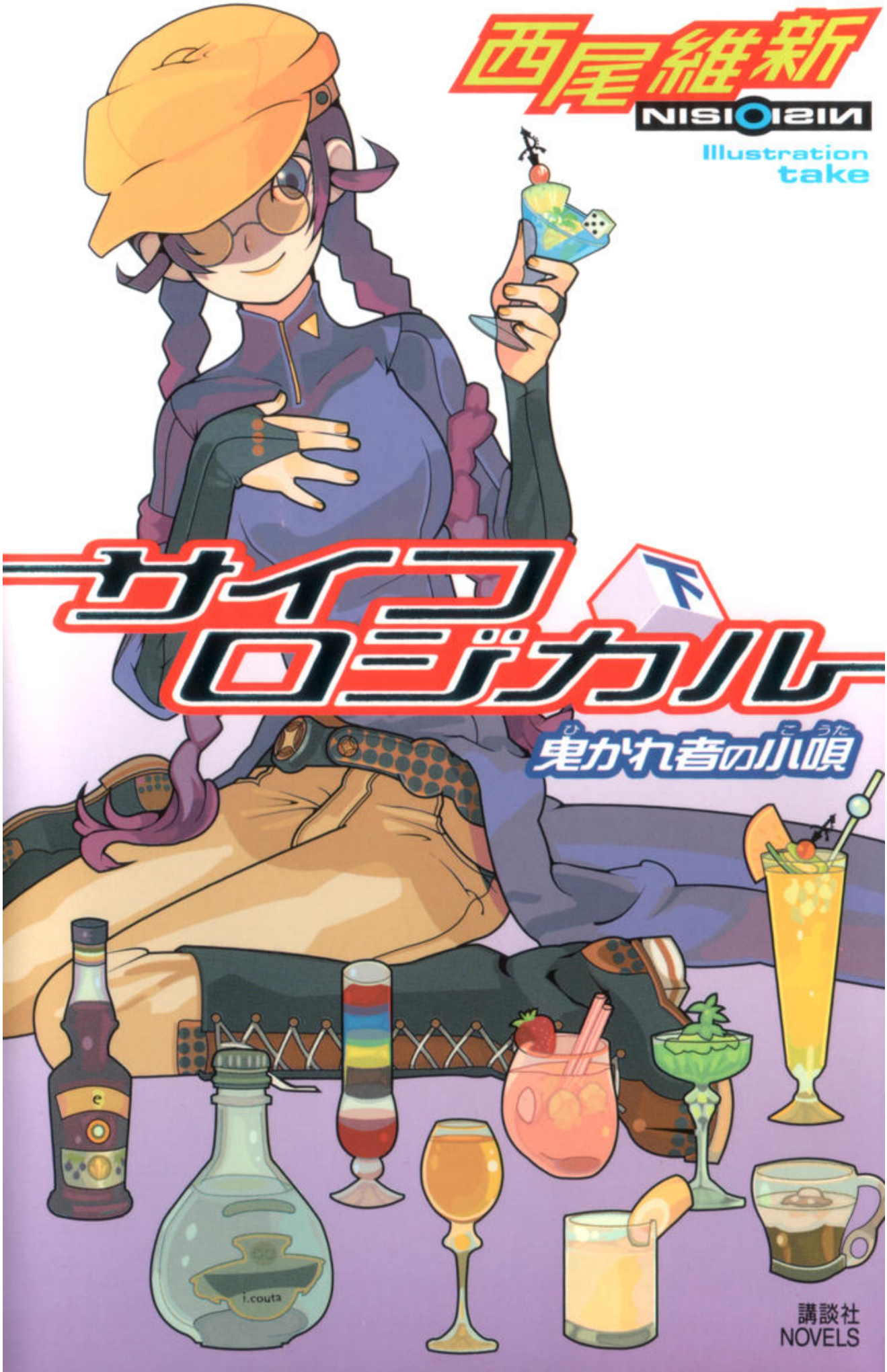
When it was reuniting with Utsurigi.

This was nothing like that.

I had finally, at this point, gradually begun to comprehend the true meaning behind Utsurigi's words, that he had left to me yesterday before a blade had been shoved through his mouth, what that man who knew of a different era of Kunagisa Tomo.

It would probably be some time later that I truly understood everything. However at this point, a switch had definitely been flicked. A switch, for myself, and for this Kunagisa Tomo, that declared a far too belated beginning, had been flicked on after six years. In the end the end of the beginning was not the beginning of the end, but rather just the end of the beginning. Whether the end begins afterwards, cannot be recognized until the end. That was why.

The Verge and the Bacteria, stood there, as if looking into each others' eyes.


西尾維新
NISIOISIN
Illustration
take
サイコロジカル
下
鬼かれ者の小唄
講談社
NOVELS

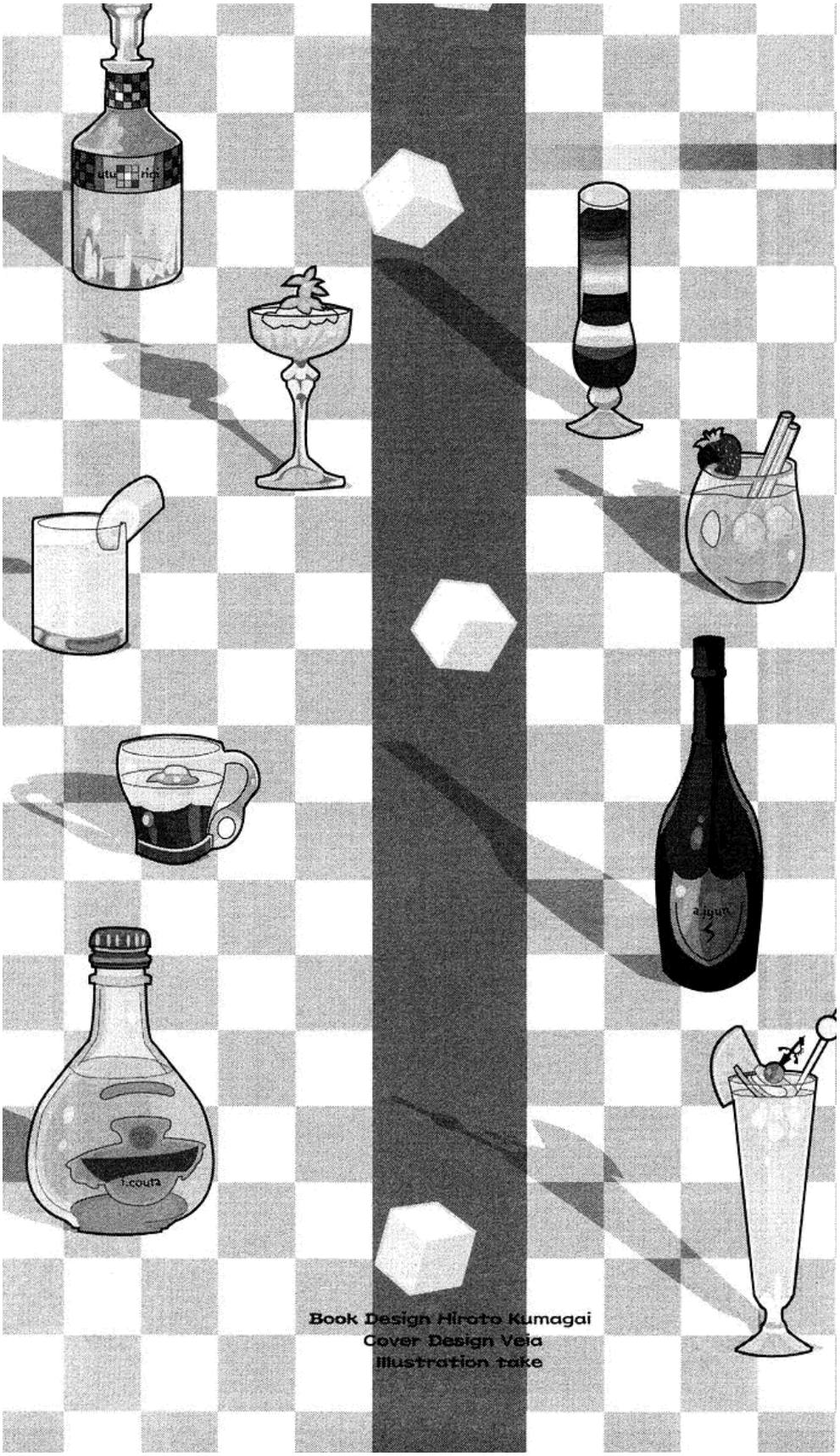
~Translated by suiminchuudoku

[1)] Triple layered title: at face-value it's a Japanese idiom, 曳かれ者の小唄, which refers to someone about to be given the hammer showing some last-minute bravado. However, the way Kouta is written coincides with the character Ishimaru Kouta's name, which ends up making it look like "Kouta the prisoner." And finally, it can also mean sour grapes.

目次

一日目（1）……正解の終わり
一日目（2）……罰と罰
一日目（3）……青い檻
一日目（4）……微笑と夜鷹
二日目（1）……今更の始まり
二日目（2）……感染犯罪　7
二日目（3）……偽善者日記　67
二日目（4）……死願症　115
二日目（5）……首輪物語　165
二日目（6）……たったひとつの冴えないやりかた　201
後日談……負け犬達の沈黙　255

＊「二日目(1)……今更の始まり」までが上巻の内容です。


Book Design Hiroto Kumagai
Cover Design Veia
Illustration take

登場人物紹介

玖渚友（くなぎさ・とも）――――――――――――――――――――≪死線の蒼≫。

鈴無音々（すずなし・ねおん）――――――――――――――――――保護者。

ぼく（語り部）――――――――――――――――――――――――十九歳。

斜道卿壱郎（しゃどう・きょういちろう）――――――――≪堕落三昧≫。

大垣志人（おおがき・しと）――――――――――――――――――助手。

宇瀬美幸（うせ・みさち）――――――――――――――――――――秘書。

神足雅善（こうたり・ひなよし）――――――――――――――――研究局員。

根尾古新（ねお・ふるあら）――――――――――――――――――研究局員。

三好心視（みよし・こころみ）――――――――――――――――研究局員。

春日井春日（かすがい・かすが）――――――――――――――――研究局員。

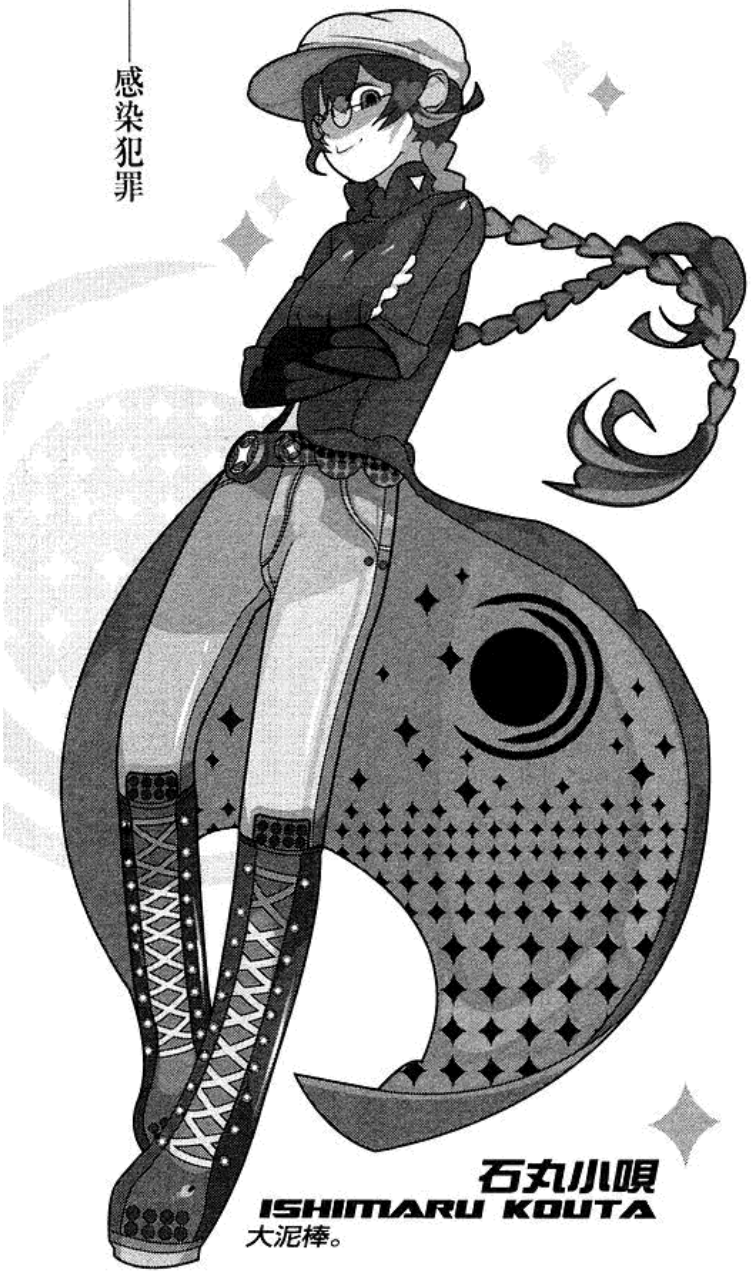
兎吊木垓輔（うつりぎ・がいすけ）――――――――――――≪害悪細菌≫。

哀川潤（あいかわ・じゅん）――――――――――――――――――請負人。

石丸小唄（いしまる・こうた）――――――――――――――――大泥棒。

零崎愛識（ぜろざき・いとしき）――――――――――――――――侵入者。

二日目（2）——感染犯罪



Day 2 (2)

Contagion Crime

0

There are no flowers that do not wilt but there are flowers that do not blossom.

The world is absolutely unfair.

1

”– you good-for-nothing!”

Professor Kyouichirou shouted with a cracked roar, and beat Shito-kun with his wooden staff. Shito-kun did not attempt to get out of the way, took a blow to the head, and crumpled to the ground. However, Professor Kyouichirou did not let up, and continued to lay into Shito-kun’s body with his staff.

“Good-for-nothing, good-for-nothing, **good for nothing**!” he repeated.

We watched that.

With nothing to say or do, we watched that.

In that visitor room in the first ward. Shadou Kyouichirou, Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, Miyoshi Kokoromi, Kasugai Kasuga. Uze Misachi, Oogaki Shito. And Suzunashi Neon, Kunagisa Tomo, myself. Those ten were gathered. This meant that everyone in the facility other than *her* were gathered here.

”–.....”

At least an hour had passed since then, but a police organization had still not arrived. Misachi-san had apparently already handled contacting authorities after discovering the body, but our location so deep in the

mountains plus the overnight rain affected their response. The roads probably were not affected much, so it should just take a bit longer to arrive.

A murder.

Is what it would be, would it not?

It did not sink in yet, but I think that should be right. It was not sinking in yet at all, that the Utsurigi Gaisuke that spoke so frankly yesterday would be killed, but that should be about right.

"Shit... it was supposed to be my turn for questions today..."

I mumbled that line while having Shito-kun being scolded reflecting off my eyes. If the reality were otherwise, what would I have asked that man? I feel like there were things I needed to ask, but I also felt like there was nothing to ask. In the end, Utsurigi was able to quit while he was ahead. Regardless of whether that was what he wished or not.

"– please stop."

Said Misachi-san, clinging to the Professor's arm.

"Professor, calm down–"

"Shut up!"

Professor Kyouichirou then flung Misachi-san away, and on top of that, beat her with his staff the same way he did Shito-kun. Misachi-san covered her face with her arm and took the hit, and then with a small scream fell to the ground.

"**Each and every one** getting in mind–"

The Professor said, as he kicked Misachi-san's back.

"–....."

So easily they crumble.

Those things called people.

Right now, the small old man throwing a tantrum in front of me had not a shred of that presence, that veteran feel. Nothing whatsoever that I saw yesterday. In its place was someone like a child who just had a previous toy broken, someone just scattering things everywhere like an infant. Even a person of that magnitude falls apart this easily. For better or for worse, it was no longer the Shadou Kyouichirou that cowed me with his far superior presence.

That is why, if it were to have been me instead.

"How unsightly, Professor Shadou."

Right as Professor Kyouichirou raised his staff to beat Misachi-san once more, a voice that sounded like an fired arrow echoed around the room. Due to that, the Professor's arm froze at its apex.

The voice belonged to Suzunashi-san.

She sat in a chair with a leg crossed over the other, her jaw was raised as if to look down on the Professor, and truthfully, she looked at the Professor with disdain.

"Jeez – I had some expectations because you had a grandiose nickname like the *Mad Demon*, but those expectations were way off. You've got a boring life, you. Unbelievably boring. A person who's lived sixty years loses control just because one person died, even beating on women and children while throwing a tantrum without ever bothering to check on the situation. Really, how unsightly, how unsightly, how unsightly–"

"Shut up! A girl who hasn't even lived thirty years has no right to talk back to me! You know nothing!"

The Professor shouted, and then he threw the staff at Suzunashi-san. Suzunashi-san did not bother to avoid it, and did not even blink. The head of the staff shattered at Suzunashi-san's forehead. Even then, Suzunashi-san simply snorted, "Hmph," and continued looking at the Professor with disdain.

A look that was truly as if she was simply looking at a pathetic animal. As someone who had been looked-at by Suzunashi-san like that before, I could more or less figure how the Professor felt. That look made you taste how small and insignificant you are.

"You... looking at me with those eyes–"

"Professor! Please stop!" Shito-kun yelled while still on the ground. "Calm down – please cool your head."

"Calm! How can I become calm like this! If **that** dies–" the Professor turned back to Shito-kun. "If **that** dies, **if that disappears** what happens! Everything is over! Every **thing** that I've built up until now is done for!"

That – Utsurigi Gaisuke.

"..... who," the Professor looked toward the table where everyone was seated with hostility-filled eyes. "Who killed that? Who did it! Who pulled this stunt and for what purpose! It's one of you wasn't it! You shameless immoral!"

The Professor shouted and slammed both hands on the table. However, no one responded. That was probably not because anyone was intimidated by the Professor, but rather simply, because no one had an answer to give toward that question.

Suzunashi-san was no longer looking at the Professor, as if she wanted to say *there was no longer any value in looking*. A bit of blood could be seen on her forehead, presumably from the staff. However, Suzunashi-san did not seem to care about that. She looked like she was thinking about something, but at the same time it could look like she was not thinking about anything.

And Kunagisa, sitting next to her, just quietly observed.

"–..... it is nonsense."

The start of this – well, I do not know if it could be called that, but anyways, it was supposedly Shito-kun who first realized the abnormal. In the morning, Utsurigi did not make his usual call. That alone had happened several times to date – oversleeping or forgetting or mischief, or other such rather Utsurigi-like reasons – so he did not pay that much heed, but when he called Utsurigi, there was no response.

He thought something was off about that and let the Professor and Misachi-san know. And then the Professor ordered, *go check on him*, and Shito-kun obliged. This was around six-thirty.

And then Shito-kun discovered **that**. The bloodied body that had been violated all over with blades that belonged to Utsurigi. The murder art of the *immoral* that had been displayed on a whole wall, had been completely shown to him.

The discoverer of Utsurigi Gaisuke's corpse was Oogaki Shito.

"..... immoral....."

I do not know why the Professor used that word, but the meaning probably was straightforward. This was deep in the mountains, and thus in one way a sealed space. If someone inside were killed, then the suspect would therefore probably be one of the others.

In other words, a terrible and typical happening.

"– well, let's calm down, everyone."

Just as an insufferable feeling was descending on everyone – no, just as an insufferable feeling was about to settle in on everyone, it was Neo-san

who changed the mood. As if he were about to play a joke on everyone, he lifted both of his hands and took a composed posture.

"There's nothing to gain from getting all hot-headed over this. Isn't that right? Professor. We need to think about what to do next."

"**Next**?" the Professor looked at Neo-san with irritation. "What do you mean to do now? There exists no **next**. Nowhere."

"Now now, it's not good to throw everything by the wayside like that. That's right, how about we make the person who did such an outrageous thing take responsibility. Come come, look at how out flamboyant it was, there's no way there's no evidence. Once the police arrive they'll figure it out right away. And then–"

"Suspect? It's one of you isn't it?"

"That's just short-sighted, Professor. Not like you at all, Professor Kyouichirou. Didn't we just have an intruder alert the other day? We can't just decide that it wasn't someone else. No, it must be. After all, even if this is a tough castle to crack, it doesn't mean it's infallible."

– intruder.

I stiffed a bit at that word, though only to the point where no one would notice.

"I don't blame you one bit for suspecting an inside job, but that's not a good way to start. After all, we – as researchers would have no reason to do that, right? **That** was a precious, precious **specimen** even for us."

"Neo!"

This time the Professor shouted in a different way. However, Neo-san simply waved that off and said, "Oh what does it matter."

"The Lady of Kunagisa and that bright-looking lady, even the boy must have figured. That's why they came this far. Isn't that right? Let's be through with deceiving and misdirecting and disguising against each other. Isn't this a situation to just open up?"

"……" "……"

Neo-san said and looked at the Professor and Kunagisa, and while the Professor looked back silently with his teeth grinding, Kunagisa simply ignored the words, as if she had never heard them to begin with. Neo-san shrugged his shoulders, "golly golly."

"Well, that's that, let's continue. Anyways, that's why no researcher would want to kill Utsurigi-san. That's obvious. Then what? Would it be

the Professor's secretary, Uze Misachi, or perhaps the assistant, Oogaki Shito-kun?"

Misachi-san and Shito-kun, still lying on the ground to the left and right of the Professor, reacted at the same time.

"However, this too cannot be. Everyone knows how loyal they are to the Professor. Not to mean any offence, but Shito-kun's devotion in particular is abnormal. Doing such a thing would obviously only draw the ire of the Professor, so it would be out of the question. Then, what would you do? Yes, you would suspect the *Guests*, the Lady of Kunagisa and her friends, but–"

Neo-san then turned toward us.

"This, too, cannot be. Because these three came to save Utsurigi-san. *Save* is a rather painful word to use toward us, but anyways they wouldn't be trying to kill him. Isn't that right?" and then Neo-san turned back to the Professor. "Then, Professor, it means nobody here is the suspect. Of course, that includes you."

"....."

I do not know if it could be called summarizing, but Neo-san's reasonable logic silenced even the Professor. No matter how furious or far his mental state was from being calm, whether down on luck or withered or shriveled or rotting he was still Shadou Kyouichirou, a man who could not simply ignore logic.

"And in that case, I can't think that anyone other than an outsider did it. Especially given that much of a performance, you know, maybe it's that enemy organization to the Professor? I think the Hariura Syndicate or the Visar Organization are particularly suspicious."

"..... they would never be so overt."

"Maybe. But the possibility is there. So I think it's too early to declare that there's an immoral within. Right? Isn't that right, everyone?"

Neo-san turned around as if seeking everyone's opinion.

"....."

Indeed, I agreed. His speech mannerism was extremely casual, but it was probably a means of smashing through the heavy feeling. At the very least, Neo-san succeeded in calming everyone – especially the Professor – to the point of being able think rationally.

Of course, that included me.

”– Kokoromi-sensei.”

I, I called to Kokoromi-sensei, who sat a small distance away from us. Sensei widened her eyes and responded, “Hm?” and then for some reason grinned a bit, and turned to me and asked, “What’s it, my pupil?”

”..... what’s it, got something to ask, my pupil?”

”..... sensei. Would you not be able to deduce some things just by looking at that?” I said, nervously. “After all, you are an expert in dissecting human beings. How Utsurigi Gaisuke was killed, the cause of death or something–”

“Heheh. I’d never’ave expected ya’d depend on me for anything. Life’s pretty boring, but I guess it’s worth living for moments like these,” sensei gave me that look she always used to give me, that detestable smile. “Well I only looked at it, so there’s nothing much t’say.”

”.....”

“Bled to death. If not, shock from his wounds. Well, anyone could tell that much, eh,” the Professor began talking to everyone without looking at anyone in particular. “The time of death would be, yah, around last night, in the three hours from midnight to three in the morning, I guess.”

“Rather large interval.”

“Well yah. Normally when I wanna tell the time of death **with a glance**, I use their state of rigor mortis and the state of their eyes, but I haven’t touched Utsurigi-san’s body, and well ya know about his eyes.”

Utsurigi-san’s eyes, which were pierced with scissors.

“Sorry I can’t live up to your hopes, but that’s all I can tell ya now.”

”..... thanks.”

I nodded, and looked away from sensei.

Midnight to three... what was I doing then? If I remember correctly, I met with Kasugai-san around one, and then, after that–

“What here what here. Are you thinking of asking for alibis, young man?” Neo-san said. “Then there’s a better way. Right, Uze-san?”

Misachi-san snapped her face up with a “What?” when she was suddenly mentioned.

”– what is it?”

“Go take a look. At the door entry logs.”

”.....”

Misachi-san looked dubiously at the Professor, who irritably barked, “hurry up and go.”

”….. understood.”

Misachi-san nodded, and then quickly left the room.

Log…? I tilted my head to the side at the word. What did that mean? Ahh, perhaps that severe security system for entering and exiting the laboratory wards (card key, numeric password, ID, voice recognition, and even a retina scan–) recorded everything in some central computer somewhere. I see, then indeed, the time of the crime would be definitively narrowed down. After all, in order to enter the seventh ward–

”… to enter?”

My thoughts broke off there.

Right. It was not just a matter of records. In order to enter the seventh ward you would need to **break through** that *severe security system*. Someone without being registered with a key would not be able to even enter, much less kill Utsurigi.

Then – I looked at Neo-san. Did Neo-san not realize? Because in that case, not one **outsider** would be able to step foot inside the seventh ward.

For example, the red Contractor, Aikawa Jun. She was so skilled in voice-mimicking and mind-reading, plus lock-picking that there would be no one to her right, and she was so far ahead that no one would be to her left, either (at least, according to her). It may be better to only half-trust her words given how much of a narcissist and how much self-confidence she needs to be to go around calling herself mankind’s strongest, but I think even that Aikawa-san would not be able to break through that impenetrable wall. They were strict, logic-based machines, after all.

Neo-san simply sat his large and wide body on a chair while looking completely composed. There was no way of course that he had not realized it. There was no way that Neo-san would have failed to recognize the paradox that he himself had said. Then, was that simply a means of placating the Professor?

– how shrewd.

I thought that once more. And as I thought that, I became even more calm.

As such, the truth is that the three of us – Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san and I – the three of us would not have been able to commit that crime.

Because we were not registered as researchers, we would not be able to clear ourselves through the locks, and as a result, we would naturally be removed from the pool of suspects.

"–....."

At the same time, that rejected the possibility of **her** being the suspect. That left seven – that narrowed the suspects down to the seven researchers who were in this facility to begin with. Because thy were the only ones capable of invading a ward, so this was certain. There were no large mistakes to this set of logic, no mistakes that would require significant changes to this set of logic.

I subtly doubted – Professor Kyouichirou, Neo-san, Koutari-san, Kasugai-san, Sensei, and Shito-kun – and Misachi-san, who had left the room. Seven people. However, what Neo-san had said earlier was not entirely a means of placating. I could not think of a motive for any of these seven people to kill Utsurigi-san – and in such a brutal way. I could not think of any.

"But you know," Neo-san. "All last night I was just in my lab – the fifth ward. How about you, Koutari-san?"

"Same here," Koutari-san gave a short reply. "No reason to walk at night."

"Same here, yah."

"I went outside once to walk the dogs. And I ran into that boy on the way, right?"

Kasugai-san said to me. I nodded silently.

"How about you? Professor?"

The Professor answered Neo-san's question irritably, "Same."

"I was here in this first ward the whole time, with Shito and Uze. That'll be apparent from the log."

"I see, and you?" Neo-san shifted his attention to us. "What were you all doing last night?"

"We were in the inn the whole time. I took a quick walk before it started raining, though."

"Mmhmm, a walk," Neo-san said with emphasis. "I see, a night walk, rather human. Hmm, then it would mean there's no suspect here. Because no one went by the seventh ward."

But Neo-san himself probably thought no such thing. To take a walk at night, and then lie about it, that is what a human does. Nothing said that everyone is honest to everyone.

"..... hey, Inoji," Suzunashi-san whispered so that only I could hear. "This is going to turn out to be a bit bad for us."

"—? Is it not already..." I glanced sideways at Kunagisa (she was still staring off into space) and whispered back to Suzunashi-san. "Not to take the Professor's words, but everything is over now... because Utsurigi was killed, so there was no point in us coming here, and we are just a bother now."

No, Suzunashi-san was probably not meaning that, but rather the police interrogation and such that would follow. We would probably go through a lengthy investigation process, and presumably, we would be considered suspects for a while, and would be stuck in the Aichi prefecture. We may be late getting back to Kyoto. I am a bored university student and Kunagisa is an unemployed hikikomori, so we do not mind, but Suzunashi-san has work (even if it is part-time). I thought that was the sort of *trouble* she was referring to, but Suzunashi-san said, "that's not what I mean."

"I mean that it feels like the wind's blowing against us... really, nothing good ever comes of listening to Asano's requests... I won't say always even though it's always the case... and I still always listen to her even though I know it..."

"Um, Suzunashi-san?"

As I was bewildered by Suzunashi-san, who appeared to be berating herself, Misachi-san returned. She had a troubled expression, and first walked toward everyone, and then hesitated, and walked to the Professor. And then she whispered something in his ear.

"..... what?" the Professor blurted out, and he confirmed something with Misachi-san. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes... there is no mistaking it."

She confirmed. I do not know what she confirmed, but in any case Misachi-san nodded. And then the Professor took that and looked like he began thinking hard. And then the Professor sat in his chair and turned toward the table. And then, still seated, he hunched over in more thought.

"....."

..... what in the world did Misachi-san tell the Professor?

No, what was said was not the problem here. The problem was that the Professor heard that and regained his composure – or more accurately, the bottomless feel he gave was reminiscent of the first time I had seen him, and it was like he had settled back into his small physique. That he looked like that again was a problem for me. I did not know yet why it was a problem, but anyways, it was a problem.

In other words, I had a bad feeling. The same feeling I had when I confirmed my reunion with sensei swirled around my stomach. And that bad feeling had never once been wrong. Just like that worst fortune-teller, it never once missed.

"– hmph."

The Professor raised his head, his body still hunched over. Suddenly, everyone looked at the Professor.

"It seems we're in quite some trouble, ladies and gentlemen."

Upon hearing the single word, trouble, I looked at Suzunashi-san. She had closed her eyes, and was looking like she was trying to sleep. It looked like blood had already stopped flowing from her cheeks. I turned my eyes back to the Professor. He had regained that wily, old grin and expression.

"–hey, Uze," the Professor looked at Misachi-san. "– go contact the security guards at the gate. Tell them if the police arrive, turn them back."

"What..." Misachi-san looked surprised at the Professor's words. "But, what, why..."

"Who cares about the reason. Well, right, just tell them it was a mistaken report. A child's..." the Professor looked at Shito-kun. "... mischief."

"..... huh," Misachi-san nodded without understanding. She looked like she did not understand the situation very well – no, like she did not understand the situation at all. "..... a mistaken report....."

"What? Hurry up and go."

"..... but, why....."

"Are you unable to work for me without asking for the reason every time?"

"No, that's not... I'm sorry, I'll be right back."

Misachi-san hurriedly bowed her head to the Proefssor, and then ran out of the room again.

"..... what's going on, Professor?" Neo-san asked, while staring at the door that Misachi-san had just passed through. "Turning back the police? I

think that's insane. What did Uze-san whisper to you?"

"That's the thing, Neo. That's the thing," the Professor Kyouichirou grinned. "We're in quite some trouble."

"..... well, of course we're in quite a pickle. But that's a different problem. What good does turning the police back do us in solving our predicament?"

"Now listen."

The Professor waved off Neo-san's complaints. And then he paused for a few seconds, before resuming, "to start with, Neo."

"What you said is odd. The entrance to Utsurigi's seventh ward has a tremendous amount of security. No matter the intruder, no one can get through. **At the very least**, that's the case for Hariura or Visar."

The Professor emphasized *at the very least* with staccato. I felt weight behind those words that I did not understand. What was this elder trying to say?

Neo-san exaggeratedly followed the Professor's point with an "Ahh, that might be true. I never thought of that."

"However, does that still provide the grounds for suspecting the people within? Professor, we've all worked together for some time. I understand you're out of sorts because Utsurigi-san ended up the way he did, but it's a bit of a tough predicament for us..."

"Out of sorts? How rude. I'm not, at all. I'm extremely calm."

The Professor said, boldly, as if his early tantrum was an optical illusion.

"But, however, Professor..."

"Don't worry, Neo. I wouldn't suspect someone within without having proof, right? Wanna know what Uze just told me?"

While everyone probably had issues with the first half of his words, they were drawn to the latter half, and awaited the rest. Professor Kyouichirou played coy for a moment, and then,

"..... last night, there's no record of the *Seventh Ward* being opened."

He said.

"..... no record?" Neo-san repeated. "No record, so does that mean there's no footprint of someone entering the Seventh Ward last night?"

"Exactly. The last person to open the door to the Seventh Ward was Shito and... the Lady of Kunagisa and that boy, when that trio met with Utsurigi. Of course, **if you think about it normally** there shouldn't be an error in the log, right, Neo?"

The Professor this time emphasized *if you think about it normally*. As if he were trying to say that there exists a method outside of the norm. ..... perhaps the Professor already knew the suspect... already knew who the immoral was? It had only been an hour since the incident had been discovered, yet we may already be at the solution scene. However, not to take Suzunashi-san's words, but this is not a movie, and I am unable to predict the remaining time. Part of me thinks this is it, and part of me thinks we are still only half way. There was no way for me to know if there were only a few pages left.

My position was uncertain.

"Well then everything gets messed up. That means no one entered the Seventh Ward. Are you sure it's not a machine error?"

"That's impossible. You know **that** best, don't you?"

"Then..." Neo-san seemed to think a bit. "... in terms of possibilities, it would make Oogaki-kun or the Lady of Kunagisa or her friend the suspects, because they entered last... however in that case Miyoshi-san's estimation of the time of death would be wrong. Professor, that would make this an impossible crime."

"There's another problem, Neo," the Professor laughed with plenty of composure. "Well, settle down and listen to me. Calm down. It's unsightly for an adult to lose their composure. Uze **investigated** what went in and out of the Seventh Ward too... the records of whether the other researchers, including myself, entered or left."

".....? Other... you mean us?"

"There are others," Professor Kyouichirou said heartily. As if the more he talked, the more his excitement meter filled. Yet by contrast, it felt that my feelings... or rather my instinct, or something like it, sank ever deeper.

I was beginning to understand. I was not exactly sure what the Professor was wanting to say, but I was beginning to understand where he was wanting to head. And the composure that was wrought by it, that self-importance that was wrought by it. Jones' Principle[1]. People who laugh despite the things going against them are already thinking of whom to blame.

Then–

"The result – I'll say it because Uze isn't here, but the result – is that at night, at the very least during the timeframe that Miyoshi said, **no one left**

their own research ward."

Everyone sucked in their breath at what he said.

"Aside from one, anyways... Kasugai."

Said the Professor. Kasugai-san twitched in response to the Professor's words, with almost no expression.

"Kasugai left the fourth ward from around 1 AM for about five minutes. That would be the *walking the dogs* she referred to. But this isn't worth fretting over. That sort of spectacle could not be constructed in just five minutes."

"... well, thank you," Kasugai-san said with a tone of voice that sounded as if she wanted to continue, *though I don't really understand.* "Thank you, in any case."

"..... hm? Then, that would mean..." Neo-san said with a faltering voice. "..... huh? Then, Professor, that means there's even less of a reason to suspect us, right? We didn't leave our research wards. And there are no entry logs for the seventh ward. Then....."

"An impossible crime."

Kokoromi-sensei stole Neo-san's words.

"Wouldn'tcha think that's the case, my pupil?"

"..... I do think that would be the case....."

I chose my words carefully as I affirmed my teacher's words. Indeed, theoretically, if you were to accept the Professor's words at face value – then it would mean no one entered the seventh ward, and it would mean that no one left their own research ward. In that case, if you were to summarize this with a simple word.

A sealed-room mystery.

Meant in a very physical matter sort of way.

"However, if this were to be an impossible crime–"

If that were what Professor Kyouichirou was trying to drive people toward, then what meaning would there be to telling the police off? Would it not be their time to shine if that were the case, I thought, as I remembered the pair of detectives from the Kyoto Prefecture Police. Then, naturally, I was able to see where the Professor was sitting.

He smiled triumphantly.

"Impossible? Such a foolish **thing** doesn't exist in this world. Everything is either possible, or **already** possible."

“But still, Professor, we’re in such a situation, so why’d you turn the police away?” Neo-san asked my question exactly. “That doesn’t make sense, then. Very unlike you, Professor.”

“Come, come. Hey, Neo, how about thinking every so often? You’ll end up with the title of idiot if you haven’t figured it out by now.”

“Idiot, then,” Neo-san crossed his arms. “However, Professor.”

“We aren’t the only ones **here** are we?”

He said–

As the Professor turned his jaw at the three of us. After that, Neo-san with some surprise, Koutari-san without any surprise, Kokoromi-sensei who could not seem to care less, Kasugai-san who could not care less, and Shito-kun with eyes wide open, turned toward us.

I swallowed. Suzunashi-san still had her eyes shut. Perhaps she was truly asleep. When it came to Kunagisa Tomo by her side, she too did not seem fazed, as she simply sat with her eyes gazing off and not focused on anything in particular. Maybe she was thinking about how Raja Maharaja [2)] and Parappa the Rapper [3)] were related, or perhaps she was not. In any case, it was clear this was not a normal situation. I looked over our combat potential (though it was a depressing sight to behold) and then looked back at the others.

“I cannot allow that to pass, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou,” I forced down the tone of my voice and said to the Professor. “You make it sound like we are the suspects, and that we are the ones who killed Utsurigi-san. Even the Professor has limits on how far things can be taken.”

“Hmm? Hey, hey, I said nothing yet,” the Professor said with a cackle, speaking down at us. “What’re you getting excited about? Or do you have something you’re hiding?”

“Once you are through suspecting your inner circle, you turn your suspicions to us? What a simple thing to do. Indeed, that building had no security at all, so we can leave at any time. However, Professor, we have an even bigger alibi than you, because we cannot enter the seventh ward. Whether the logs kept a record or not does not matter given that we do not even have a registered ID, so we would not be able to enter or even leave the seventh ward.”

“Kahah! Alibi? I wonder! That word is too meaningless!”

The Professor cackled in a grandiose way, and then like a switch had been flicked, suddenly squinted his eyes and glared at me, then pointed his finger.

"You wouldn't be able to do anything alone, **brat**. You wouldn't be able to enter or leave the seventh ward. But you're not alone, are you? There's an **incredulous thing** among the three of you–"

He slid the finger that was pointed at me to the side, and the Professor – pointed at Kunagisa Tomo.

"Right, Lady of Kunagisa?"

As expected, Kunagisa showed no reaction to that. As if she was hearing nothing at all, as if she was seeing nothing at all, she did not react. However, everyone other than Kunagisa and Suzunashi could not hide their surprise at the Professor's words.

"Wa– Professor, but..."

"What? Neo. It's not something to be that surprised over is it? After all, the Lady of Kunagisa was the charisma behind that *Cluster*. The **former** leader and **comrade** of our victim Utsurigi Gaisuke. She can probably break through that level of security while humming to herself. Isn't that right, Lady of Kunagisa?"

Kunagisa did not react. In turn, the Professor seemed irritated... or perhaps it seemed he became a bit more desperate, as he immediately recomposed himself, laughed with a "hmph," and showed composure.

"No words because I'm right?"

"There is absolutely no logic behind that, Professor," I said, recognizing that I was speaking a bit quicker, yet still managing to calm myself down. "There is no reason that Kunagisa would be able to break through that superfluous security..."

"Not just break through. After breaking through, she deleted the logs. A roughshod method, but I can only say it backfired. Not bothering to touch the logs of other wards shows how she is just a child."

"This is absurd. There is no reason behind that. Just a child? Who are you to say that? If Kunagisa can break the lock, then you..."

"There's a reason," the Professor said. "There's a reason why only the Lady of Kunagisa could do the feat of breaking the lock and deleting the logs. After all, **creating** the management program for this system, designing this *superfluous security*, and **manufacturing** the **materials** for

this research facility at the mere age of 12 were all done by the Lady of Kunagisa."

The Professor said and pointed at Kunagisa again.

As for Kunagisa, again, she showed no reaction. She said not a word since she saw Utsurigi's brutalized corpse. However, I thought. If what the Professor said were the truth.

"She's an unbelievable genius, to the point that an ordinary person like you couldn't imagine. Even I can't understand it. However, that's why, Lady of Kunagisa... that becomes the reason for **prosecuting** the three of you."

"Prosecuting? Prosecuting?" I stood from my seat. "This is ridiculous. Such nonsensical reason would never pass!"

"Calm down, my pupil," Kokoromi-sensei interjected in the Professor and I's conversation. I looked at her and noticed that at some point, she had begun smoking a cigarette and had a can of cola in her right hand. When did this person do all this, really. "Didn'tcha hear Suzunashi-san say it's pathetic to lose control of yaself?"

"..... sensei."

"Professor. Ya know in that case a buncha things still don't make sense?"

Said Kokoromi-sensei as she pointed her cigarette at the Professor. I could not tell its brand, but it was a very thin, probably female-oriented cigarette. But she used to smoke cigars abroad, so perhaps she damaged her lungs?

"Doesn't make sense? What is it, Miyoshi."

"What Neo-san said a while back, ya know. These three came to *save* Utsurigi-san. So that'd mean they've got no reason to kill him, yah? The Lady of Kunagisa is the former leader of Utsurigi-san, as ya said yaself, Professor, so it makes even less sense. Same as none of us having any motive to kill Utsurigi-san, these three've got none either, ya know."

"You have such poor imagination, Miyoshi," the Professor said. "Let's do something called flipping our expectations around. After all, we're intellectuals, are we not? Well you are into biology so maybe it can't be helped..."

"Ahh, that statement unjustly discriminates against a certain sect of academia, ya know. Like ya sayin' math and engineering're better than

biology, an expression that condescends others, ya know. Ain'that right, Kasugai-chan?"

"Absolutely. That's a statement that could only be spoken by an engineer that mistakenly believes that the world is made up of just their equations. One must be embarrassed to say that. Their sensitivity must be dulling from looking at Arabic numerals all day."

Kasugai-san added her pace to sensei.

Hmm. There is conflict even within science. I had always thought people of science were all of the same side, but it seems that was a mistaken assumption, I thought, a thought that was certainly out of place here.

That said, Kasugai-san, she was like that last evening as well; she seems like an apathetic person but she has a remarkably harsh tongue. I might like her, I thought, yet more thoughts that were certainly out of place here. By doing that, I escaped.

"That's not what I meant, but..." the Professor smiled wryly as he was beset by two female researchers. "Well let me take that back then, Miyoshi, and ask you if there's any basis for what Neo said about them having come here to *save* him?"

"..... basis?" sensei looked at us. "Basis... well, ya know, but....."

"For example if Kunagisa had come here to ***kill*** Utsurigi Gaisuke from the start?"

"Kill.....?" even sensei was forced to furrow her brows. "What? Whatcha mean? I don't get it."

"In other words, they came to this research facility to kill Utsurigi. If that was what they meant to do from the start–"

"That's preposterous!" I broke character and shouted. "If you want to talk about a lack of basis, **that** is certainly **that**! Why in the world would Kunagisa kill her *friend* and *teammate* Utsirigi? There is no reason at all for us to want to do–"

"Hey, hey, careful of your mouth, brat."

The Professor's shoulders trembled with laughter.

"Your fate is in my hands. You should be thankful that I turned back the police. Can't you feel my sympathy?"

"I can feel malice for sure, Professor Mad Demon."

The Professor simply happily laughed at my retort.

“However, Professor, what the boy says has merit,” Neo-san asked the Professor. “Isn’t that line of thought too forced? Indeed, I understand where the Professor is coming from, but–”

“Reason?” the Professor stopped laughing. “Are you saying that the Lady of Kunagisa has no reason to kill Utsurigi?”

“Huh–” Neo-san momentarily lost his train of thought. “Yes, even if the Lady of Kunagisa can break through security and erase the logs on top of that. Even so, for someone related to the Kunagisa Syndicate – someone directly from the core of it, to kill Utsurigi-san without thinking–”

“You can’t say that, Neo.”

The Professor looked at Kunagisa.

“You’re right, we don’t know. I don’t know the reason why the Lady of Kunagisa needed to kill Utsurigi Gaisuke. I can’t think of any such reason at all. But who cares? It’s unnecessary. After all, this Lady Kunagisa Tomo is–”

The Professor spoke something along the lines of what he had said moments ago. However, at the end of it.

”–×××××”

Before the Professor could finish, my body already moved. It was not subconscious. My body moved with comprehension and understanding and clear thought. However, my thinking had stopped. I took a single step on top of the table with my fist balled. And as I was about to continue running that way toward the Professor, a blow hammered the right of my head. It was a cola can. At the end of my vision was the sight of Kokoromi-sensei running toward me. I see, I thought it was unnatural that she suddenly began drinking cola, but Kokoromi-sensei had probably predicted this. I would realize that some time later, and the sight of Kokoromi-sensei ended up just reflecting in my eyes and having no meaning. I could not see anything. I could not hear anything. Could not see. Could not hear. Crimson. Everything was red. Blood color. Bloodshot eyes. Light and sound and everything was scarlet. However, Kokoromi-sensei’s action had succeeded in stopping my motion for one moment. As I was about to resume running, from behind. From behind, Suzunashi-san who had caught up swept my legs out from under. My body floated in the air a bit above the large table. In that short moment, Suzunashi-san grasped my head and slammed it to the table with all of her weight behind it. The sound

of the durable wooden table groaning. That may have been the sound of my bones grinding. Of course I did not brave myself so I felt the impact along my whole body but even so I tried to run toward the Professor that Professor Kyouichirou and I stretched out my arm and Kokoromi-sensei held it down. Sensei scolded me while slapping my cheek that had caused the cola can to burst and so did Suzunashi-san as she locked my left arm. It seemed like they were saying something but I could not hear. Calm down. What am I doing what. Wrong. Right thing I am doing.

Probably.

I think I went insane then.

The moment before Suzunashi-san struck me along the back of my neck to make me lose consciousness, at the edge of the red scenery in my left eye, I felt like I caught a glimpse of Kunagisa's blue hair, but I may have been imagining things.

2

When my consciousness returned – when my consciousness recovered to the level where it could be called at least functional, we were located in a cage. A concrete floor, wall, and ceiling. A somewhat heavy feel. A melancholic feel. Listlessness, as if I want to get a little more sleep. As if I had just been watching a bad dream. However a bad dream is still probably better than a bad reality. To the point that I would be thinking such meaningless things.

Ahh, whatever. Whatever everything. The back of my head was ringing. My whole body, too. No mercy, at all. Suzunashi-san and Kokoromi-sensei both. No mercy or anything useless like that. Speaking of which sensei beat me a lot over there. At least half, no, at least ninety-percent was her letting off her melancholy, but if I think about it now, the remaining ten percent was probably justified. I said if I think of it now, but I had no intention of pondering that at this point. Not understanding until you get beat, not stopping until you get hurt. Truly, I have not grown one bit since then–

"Ah. Ii-chan, woke up?"

What clearly awakened my consciousness was that sort of Kunagisa's voice.

"Mornink."

"..... mornink," I replied to Kunagisa with a light pose, and awakened my prone body. "..... umm."

I looked around again.

It was a a cell, unchanged from when I had looked around while half-asleep. Myself, Kunagisa, and Suzunashi-san sat on the floor inside it.

"My. Inoji. You woke up. Great, great. I was worried if I hit you too much because you weren't waking up."

"Well, thanks..." I bowed my head to Suzunashi-san despite the awkward feeling of doing so. "Umm... where are we?"

"The fourth research ward. The basement of the research ward Kasugai-san uses."

”..... is that so? But, it looks like a prison.....”

“These are the cages to keep the animals for experiments,” Kunagisa laughed as she explained, for some reason enjoying this. “Ufufu-. This is the first time for boku-sama-chan, being stuck in a cage. First times are fun.”

“This is my fifth.....” I said, and I touched the steel bars. Obviously, they did not so much as brudge.

“Umm... I do not understand the situation very well... why are we in an animal cage? As long as we do not happen to have been monkeys, I do not think I can accept an explanation.”

“Why of course, the Professor’s orders. Or rather, Inoji, how much do you remember?”

”..... to be honest, not much. I know Suzunashi-san and Kokoromi-sensei beat me senseless...” I answered Suzunashi-san’s question honestly. “Um... when I was on the roof in the morning, Suzunashi-san spoke to me, and...”

“No way. All the way back there? It’d be a huge pain in the ass to explain everything from there.”

“Ahh, hold on please... I will calm down,” and then I placed my back to a concrete wall and sat down properly. ”... afterwards I tied Kunagisa’s hair... hmm? Ahh, right, right. ..... yes, I remember.”

“Good,” Suzunashi-san nodded. “That saves us a lot of trouble, thank you.”

“Ufufu, Ii-chan’s memory’s still the same. It wouldn’t be surprising if you had amnesia from that beating though.”

”.....”

Huh? It seemed Kunagisa had returned to normal, I thought, as I asked Suzunashi-san,”So, what happened while I was asleep?” The decision to ask Suzunashi-san was based on Kunagisa having returned to normal, because that meant asking her anything would be futile.

“We’re the suspects, basically,” said Suzunashi-san. “And we were imprisoned here.”

”..... thank you for that extremely succinct and clear explanation.”

The fourth ward. The research ward governed by Kasugai-san. And then the basement... I felt like we had been turned into experimental animals, but whether that was any better than being a prisoner would be a delicate

question to pose. To be imprisoned in this place, of all places, proved the Professor was nastier than I imagined.

Hmm..... come to think of it, for a certain murder incident it was my idea to imprison the suspect in an isolated location, but I see, this is how it feels to be on the other end. It is too late now but I shall never propose such an idea again.

"So, what exactly is going on?"

"Nothing at all, sadly. Well, the Professor said *We shall relieve you of some freedom while we determine how to deal with you in the future. Don't worry, we'll do nothing cruel.*"

"I see....." if we were imprisoned in a basement after having been told he was not going to do anything cruel, I wondered what he would have done if he meant to do anything cruel. It was a topic that did not give me any goosebumps. "..... ahh, I am remembering everything. ..... wow."

Belatedly, I raised a surprised voice. I feel like I had been quite an idiot. "Well, that's how it went," Suzunashi-san said in an accusing manner.

"I didn't think there was any point in rampaging alone, so I obliged them, but... well, really, I figured nothing good would ever come of going on a trip with Inoji, but I didn't expect something like this. A pheromone for attracting accidents and incidents, I suppose. Attracting? Baiting might be more accurate, in this case."

"This is unexpected for me, too....." and this time, no matter how you might look at it, not a single ounce of blame could be placed on me. As long as it was not I that killed Utsurigi, I felt Suzunashi-san's moaning made no sense. "Truly, unexpected... this time I had thought nothing else would happen..."

"Ufufu, this is why I'm never bored with Ii-chan," Kunagisa happily laughed. "Really, it's never boring. Life is fun!"

"..... your friend was the one that was killed this time, you know."

"Hmm?" Kunagisa tilted her head to the side. "..... yup, but you know, what's done is done. You've gotta think positively in life."

"..... I suppose that is who you are."

I think that was the case, anyways. I think. That the Kunagisa from before was just weird. I think, for now.

"Anyways, the problem now... is how to break through this situation."

“Break through... what a wonderful goal, that,” Suzunashi-san wrapped a hand around an iron bar. “Even I can’t do anything about these. If Asano were here maybe something could have been done, but...”

”..... Miiko-san can cut iron?”

“Well, she can cut konjac at least. ..... but they do say that Iaido and Battoudou can both eventually cut iron. Well, anyways, no point talking about someone who’s not here.”

“Indeed.”

I looked up at the ceiling. If it were a movie or something, there would usually be a handy ventilation shaft or something that we could use to escape, but as you would expect of a real-world problem, there was nothing of the sort. The world is not so kind to let you get away through such means. Gosh, no wonder the air would grow stale. Truly, do they not know how to treat people in a humane way? Anyways, based on rational observation, there appeared no means of escaping from this cage. It was locked with a lock that looked extremely sturdy, and none of us had any lockpicking skills.

“Still... that geezer really spouted some bullshit.”

“Woah. Ii-chan just got really vulgar. What a rare occasion, to do that in front of people.”

“I can get rare, too, you know. I can indeed, really. I hope they’re not setting up torture after this?”

If you consider that Kokoromi-sensei is here, that becomes a possibility. Leaving aside whether she would actually do it, that sensei is brilliant at doing things that people hate. It was not for show or out of whim that she was given the name *Early Harvester*.

“But I doubt that, you know? Because that person tried to stop Ii-chan, right? If you’d managed to punch the Professor all hell would’ve broken loose. In that sense, Kokoromi-chan seems like a pretty good person.”

“Good person... well, that might be.”

Ignorance was bliss. Hmm, it seemed while I had been unconscious Suzunashi-san had given Kunagisa a lecture about Kokoromi-sensei. Given that it was Suzunashi-san, it had probably been relayed without saying too much.

“And you know, Ii-chan. The Professor didn’t really say anything that nutty. He’s always rooted in reason.”

“Ah? Where. He’s beyond preposterous. There’s no rhyme or reason to the rhyme and reason. Even elementary school kids who haven’t even learnt how to multiply reason better.”

“I can’t multiply-,” Suzunashi-san butted in. “I quit school before I learned how.”

”..... .....” ”.....”

”? Feel free to continue?”

“Uh huh..... umm, what were we talking about?” I forgot out of shock. “Right, the Professor’s reason being insane. Yes. No one has left their research wards. No one has entered the seventh ward. Therefore, the Kunagisa Tomo Crew are the suspects. What is with that? Even Goldbach’s conjecture [4)] makes more sense.”

“Crew,” Kunagisa giggled in a snarky way. It seemed she liked the sound of *crew*. “Yup. Crew is good. Crew. Cruising along, as a crew. Or something. Ufufu.”

”.... well, better than bandits, anyways... do not change the subject though. I am already over capacity... how and why are you saying the Professor’s reasoning has basis? Just because the Lady of Kunagisa was the leader of *Cluster* she can easily open a lock like that, is truly preposte–”

“I can,” Kunagisa said, nonchalantly.

”—..... yes?”

“I can open that,” Kunagisa repeated. “Pretty easily.”

“Easily?” “Super easy.”

I clutched my head in my hands at Kunagisa’s curt response.

”..... what do you mean by that, Lady of Kunagisa?”

“Didn’t you hear the Professor? Boku-sama-chan made the core of that system. Well, to be honest, Nao-kun and Micchan helped me too. So I know how that mechanism works, even before I read about it.”

Micchan – Kasumioka Douji-san. A close friend of Nao-san, and if I were to borrow Neo-san’s words, a person who was once near the *Core of the Kunagisa Syndicate*. And currently – well, leaving currently aside, a long time ago, before I met Kunagisa, she was always a trio with Nao-san and Kasumioka-san. That said, Nao-san and Kasumioka-san were both even less than newbies at electronic engineering. Then that would mean Kunagisa had constructed it alone.

”– however, even so, you would need tools for that, would you not? If locks could be opened without keys just by knowing the system, everyone could become a lockpick. Even I know how the lock to my apartment room works, but I cannot open it without a key.”

“Yup, true,” nodded Kunagisa. “Without being Jun-chan there’s nothing to do. But – right, like, Ii-chan, like when we came into this research facility, you wrote our names, right?”

“Ahh. Wait, you were watching? I thought you were busy playing games.”

“It’s not like I’m playing games… anyways, the guard said then. These older means are tougher to mess with than relying solely on digital security.”

“Did he,” I did not remember, because it was so long ago. “Hmm. So?”

“In other words, high technology has high technology holes. To be specific, when boku-sama-chan went to the seventh ward to see Sacchan. If I’d borrowed a computer from Sacchan then and accessed the mother computer in Professor Kyouichirou’s first ward. And then I created a new fellow account for boku-sama-chan. Of course, as a BBC[5)]. And then after killing Sacchan, I’d just delete it. I’d use a log-erasing tool and make it so *nothing happened*, including the door being opened in the first place.”

Said that way, it did sound easy. However, that was just Kunagisa simplifying the explanation, and there must be plenty of protects, walls, defense programs, alert switches, and the likes.

– but if it were Kunagisa.

Indeed, it might be possible. Kunagisa already came bearing a high set of skills, so if she *knew* the security management inside-out.

Mysteriously, it was as the Professor said.

“There’re access privileges for computer security. At the very least, boku-sama-chan having an absolute advantage over everyone else is true. Come to think of it, it was actually Hii-chan that was really good at breaking through security… not that boku-sama-chan was bad at it.”

”*Hii-chan* as in </color red>Double Flip</color>?”

“Oh? Wowow, I’m surprised at Ii-chan’s memory’s functioning normally. Actually, abnormal is normal, so when it’s functioning normally I should say it’s abnormally functioning.”

“Rather rude of you there. Utsurigi kept saying that name. Next to you and Chii-kun.”

“Hmm. Sacchan makes no sense.”

I felt like being told that by Kunagisa is tantamount to being done for, but well, nothing good can come of speaking ill about the dead. Even if it were directed toward that weirdo. That Utsurigi, who was crucified and killed – or the other way around, killed and then crucified. After hearing that, Hi-chan or Chii-kun or Acchan and so on, would the people from *Team* mourn for him? As someone who did not directly know any of them, I could not make any deduction.

“However... what was that proclamation-looking thing? *You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!*, was it? In other words, *Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo...*”

“Who knows. Isn’t it just warning boku-sama-chan to *not do anything unnecessary*? Like they’re hammering in a loose nail. Heehee, yes, heeheehee.”

It seems she had found the simile *hammering in a loose nail* amusing, as Kunagisa giggled. Though the mental build one would need to laugh at that play on words was beyond me.

“Unnecessary... trying to save Utsurigi? But, if that was unnecessary, then killing Utsurigi would ruin the point.”

“I think you’ll just have to table that question for now... because if you go there, you’ll have to figure out why the suspect had to cut apart Sacchan so much, and why they took the arms away.”

“But the first thing that comes to mind for someone relentlessly cutting apart a body is enmity...”

However, I could not imagine that Utsurigi, who had not stepped outside that building for over a year, could have wrought such enmity that he would end up in such a brutal state. Of course, that was if we limited things to *within the confines of the laboratory*, but – I felt that I could not necessary remove the possibility because he may have done something while he was a member of *Team*.

“But, even if you can remove that lock. Even so, why would you kill Utsurigi... or rather, it would be hard to come up with a reason. Or rather, even before that, Shito-kun and I were with you the whole time you were in the seventh ward with Utsurigi. Leaving aside what you said with Utsurigi,

that room had no computer, so it would have been impossible to access the mother computer, right?"

"Hahah. What a blissful thing you say, Inoji," Suzunashi-san laughed. "To the Professor, such a small detail is trivial."

"– what do you mean by that?"

"In other words, as long as there's **even a bit** of reason, that's enough. It's not like the Professor seriously has any conviction that Ao-chan is the suspect. As Inoji said, the problem is whether he can **force the matter through**. This timelag is probably for that."

"Timelag?"

"Yes. The Professor is probably – and not just the Professor, the whole faculty is probably reasoning out *proof that the Kunagisa Crew were the suspects*. Kasugai-san, was it? She said, *I think a decision will be made on how to deal with you around five hours from now.* Yes, we were just talking about that, until Inoji woke up."

"..... by which you mean?"

"In other words, Ii-chan," Kunagisa said without any care. "The Professor's probably wanting to make boku-sama-chan's replacement."

Instantly, I became aghast. Using Kunagisa as a replacement for Utsurigi? That. That meant.

"In exchange for not handing us over to the police, they would want her to help their research – no, their **experiments**."

"That... that is definitely absurd."

"Yup. This situation is absurd," Suzunashi-san said with a bit of resignation. "I don't know how they intend to deal with myself and Inoji, but... right, probably hostages for Ao-chan. That's what I'd do."

"That..."

However, Kunagisa Tomo would indeed be a great replacement part for Utsurigi Gaisuke. No, she might be whole levels better. If **what the Professor was doing** was as Kunagisa predicted last night. Then Kunagisa Tomo would be the greatest of specimens for such an experiment. Utsurigi would have been sufficient, but Kunagisa would be best.

Ultra Humanoid Dogma.

"That... that is – that is something that cannot be allowed–"

"Woah there. Don't go berserking again, Inoji. If I need to restrain **that** alone, I don't have any confidence I wouldn't hurt you. Miyoshi-san

helped out last time so it went alright, but you'll need to be ready to break half your bones."

"..... I am fine. I am calm," I said, as I slammed my fist against the concrete wall. It hurt. "I am extremely calm. Yes."

"Nifufu," Kunagisa (despite this topic being about her) laughed, carefree. "This is kinda nostalgic. This sort of pinch situation, this danger-like situation."

What do you mean, danger-like.

"... you look like you are having fun, Kunagisa Tomo."

"Pretty much. But you know, this is nothing compared to when I met Ii-chan for the first time. It's not like our lives are on the line, or worse."

"..... anyways, this whole trip has been a waste," I said. "So, what shall we do now? What now, Suzunashi-san?"

"Nothing. There's nothing we can do like this," Suzunashi-san said. "Well, if I don't get back, Asano might notice and then have some sort of reaction... but that'd be like a couple days from now."

"In any case, being locked up thirty meters underground like this means boku-sama-chan can't do anything. They took away my phone and I don't have my PDA. Powerless powerless gravity-less."

"Why gravity."

I sighed heavily.

"Indeed... there does not seem to be a realistic means of breaking through this blockade–"

"– oh, but there is a means."

That voice naturally, seamlessly interrupted my dejected line. The timing was perfect, as if the speaker had been waiting for her seat all along. It was not Suzunashi-san's voice nor Kunagisa's voice, and of course it was not my voice, and it came from the other side of the iron cage.

There stood Ishimaru Kouta with her arms crossed.

Without a peep and without any presence and without any portend, there.

The denim hunting cap worn down to her eyes, the denim coat, the laced boots. The eyes faintly peering from behind the glasses were sharply looking down at us. Grinning, as if she were enjoying the situation – as if she were enjoying the situation from the bottom of her heart, just like Kunagisa, Kouta-san smiled.

"– Greetings to those I meet for the first time. And good day to you, dear friend. My name is Ishimaru Kouta," Kouta-san said while smirking just enough that we could see her expression even in the darkness, and then she lightly raised her chin. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Suzunashi-san warily scrunched her eyebrows and put herself on guard. Kunagisa's eyes widened and she tilted her head in wonder. I stood up with my back to the concrete wall.

"..... yo, Kouta-san. Thank you for last night," carefully, carefully, extremely carefully. "How bizarre to meet again here."

"I would say this is rather how opportune, dear friend," Kouta-san said with a brazen attitude and an overly-intimate choice of words, as if she were bantering. "Quite, truly, stale and cliche."

"..... what happened? Why are you here? Did you get lost?"

"Not at alllll. That is not the case, dear friend. Not at all," Kouta-san fought to stifle her laughter. "I was told that a rare species could be found in the cages, so I strolled by to take a peek. A rare species indeed, one that they say **lunged after** that Professor Shadou Kyouichirou."

"....."

"You do not laugh at all," Kouta-san sighed with exasperation. "Do you not know that smiles are a basic pillar of conversation? I am astonished that you can maintain a consummate set of human relationships. Or perhaps you are unable to?"

"Thank you for your warning, Ishimaru Kouta-san. However, I would rather die than laugh for no reason," I said and nodded slightly. "So, what do you want? How did you come this far to begin with?"

"A good question. However we shall keep that as fun for another day–" and then Kouta-san looked away from me a bit, and glanced at other two, Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san. "Fufu. Two ladies in a cage. What a splendid sight."

As if she wanted to say the one option part was in the way.

Suzunashi-san lightly smirked, “heh,” at that spontaneous, unexpected line from Kouta-san.

“Inoji is surprisingly well-connected, to have two acquaintances in such an isolated place like this,” Suzunashi-san said not to Kouta-san but to me. “Furthermore they’re both women. You’re like Ariwara no Nairhara [6].”

“Uh huh,” I did not really understand that analogy.

“So, what is your relationship with this wonderful lady?”

“Last night, I requested that man’s hand, but he magnificently rejected my advances.”

Before I could answer, Kouta-san answered Suzunashi-san’s question. She answered it.

“Is that not right, dear friend?”

”..... yes. Well, about one-tenths of that is the truth.”

“Ten percent is sufficient to be the truth. However,” Kouta-san adjusted her speech a bit. “The situation seems to have changed, so I am wondering if you might change your mind.....”

“Persistent girls end up being disliked,” Suzunashi-san finally turned to Kouta-san and spoke. “Is that not right, Mr. *Dear Friend*?”

In response, Kouta-san seemed to not shy away at all, and said, “That may be so.” She was completely parrying the belligerent tone of Suzunashi-san. It may sound like nothing, but I know how incredible that is.

“However, I am somewhat obstinate. ..... I would prefer if you toned down your belligerency. I am not particularly an enemy. If anything, I feel that we could get along quite well... especially you,” Kouta-san pointed toward me with her chin. “Do you not agree, dear friend?”

“You said *you were told* just now, didn’t you?” Suzunashi-san did not respond to Kouta-san’s question, instead posing her own question. ”*You were told*, what do you mean by that, I wonder? May I take that as someone having told you that we were locked up here?”

”– oh my. Did I let slip my tongue? Not that it matters much. Fufu, you’re as astute as you look – Suzunashi Neon-san?” Kouta-san laughed with even more pleasure. “However I wish you would put your astuteness to good use elsewhere. I said it at the start. *But there is a means*. Is that topic not more important for you three?”

A means. A means for breaking through this crisis.

Even Suzunashi-san fell silent at that. I glanced at Kunagisa, who was frozen in the same state that she was in when Kouta-san first appeared. In other words, her eyes were widened and her head was tilted to the side. Such is Kunagisa Tomo, whose thought sometimes freezes like this.

Kouta-san clapped her hands in front of her chest.

"In other words, this is what I am saying. *Shall I lend you a hand*?"

My face suddenly stiffened.

I remembered what happened last night.

"—-....."

"You are suspicious? You are being suspicious of me? I understand your feelings. One cannot simply trust a person that spontaneously appeared out of the blue and offers such a thing. That is quite an ordinary response. However....."

And then Kouta-san stuck a hand in her pocket and pulled out a knife. It had a pointed shape that seemed less a knife and more an auger, or an arrow. Shorter than a blade, and designed in a rather impractical fashion. Yes, that was not a tool for stabbing people or breaking objects, but rather its main use was not as a blade but as an anti-lock blade–

"My. It seems you know of these types of knives? Consummate, that allows me to skip the bother of explaining," Kouta-san twirled the knife around. "This was a present from a friend, and I cannot use it particularly roughly, but anyways–"

And then she slid the knife into the keyhole of the steel lock placed on the iron cage. Clatter clatter, she rattled the hilt twice and thrice, and there was a sound of something being jarred open, and the door of the cage was freed from its restraint. It opened outward with a rusted squeak.

"– now we do not need to bother with anything like trust and can resume with an objective reality."

"..... what do you want?"

Kouta-san gave me a distasteful look in response.

"You are quite rude. Did your mother not teach you that the first thing to do when you are helped is to say thank you?"

"Unfortunately I grew up absurdly pampered... and that has caused me to be distrustful of people."

“That is rather consummate, dear friend,” Kouta-san laughed with a trace of nobility this time. “How trivial. How trivial indeed. Of course, my request is unchanged and the same as last night, dear friend.”

”….. is that so.”

In any case, I nodded.

The same request as last night, which meant.

”….. what if I were to refuse again?”

“Nothing. That is itself consummate. Feel free to refuse. In that case we shall simply part left and right,” Kouta-san showed me both of her palms in a *surrender* pose. “I was strictly trained. Of course, not by my parents, but… in any case, *If you want others to be friendly to you, you must offer them your kindness without expecting any compensation, first.* Everything **thus far** has been a service.”

”….. is that so.”

How much could I trust her?

My dictionary lacks an entry for having faith in people I have met for the first time. And trust would certainly be out of the question. On top of that, this person – Ishimaru Kouta, was no doubt a person of danger such that we would normally not be speaking of trust but rather of her level of danger. Given what transpired last night and, of course, what is currently transpiring.

And more than anything, her usage of the surname *Zerozaki* as a false name was the biggest red flag.

Once, I was taught by the red color that *there are no human beings that would use Zerozaki as a false surname.* And now the person in front of me boldly used that name and invaded without bothering to hide. What could that possibly entail?

However, yes however – could the situation possibly worsen?

“Kishimaru-san, was it?” while I hesitated in responding to Kouta-san, Suzunashi-san spoke first. “Kishimaru-san, yes, you–”

”….. it’s Ishimaru,” Kouta-san said a bit miffed. “Ishimaru Kouta. Please do not mistake it.”

“I apologize,” Suzunashi-san shrugged. “I appreciate the offer, but we can’t take you up on it – I don’t know what you’re requesting of Inoji, but we can’t take you up on it.”

“My. Why would that be?” Kouta-san exaggeratedly tilted her head to the side. “**What** I am requesting may perhaps be something quite dull. For example, two thousand yen, or a deed.”

“Because it would not be an exchange,” Suzunashi-san. “We cannot leave here. Or rather, there’s no point in leaving. There’s no meaning to leaving this cage, right, Inoji?”

”..... indeed.”

Indeed. It was as Suzunashi-san said. Even if we were to escape the cage, we would not be able to leave Kasugai-san’s fourth ward. This building lacked windows, and the one entry and exit – was lorded over by the problematic *security lock*.

Even if – and this was a big *even if* but, even if what Kunagisa said were true. We could use a computer somewhere in this research ward and access the mother computer and clear the lock using security privileges or something. Then there is the possibility of escaping from this research facility. But in the end, the Fiat was probably being held down, and the gate was probably being guarded anyways. Furthermore of the three of us, only Suzunashi-san might have the physical ability to leave this mountain without a car.

Successfully escaping without dealing with that multitude of obstacles would simply end if Professor Kyouichirou were to call the police anyways, and so we would end up locked up one way or other. And that would be another good result for the Professor.

”– that’s why leaving and not leaving this cage doesn’t matter to us, Kouta-san.”

Suzunashi-san laughed with a bit of self-deprecation.

“I suppose this is what they mean by surrounded and trapped.”

“No, no. At most this is simply pushed and tunneled. There is no reason at all to be in such despair,” Kouta-san said and winked. “**That is why** this is an exchange. I have no intention of performing any exchange without merit for the other party. A proper exchange is when my merit directly relates to a merit for you, otherwise it does not become a true cooperative effort.”

A truly splendid way of thinking. No, even I have to agree with that. What Kouta-san said was truly correct. However, even so, it was not just correct.

“Then, what do you mean? That means we are back at square one, about the *means*?”

“Absolutely, dear friend. As expected of the man I have chosen... truly wise, truly wise indeed.”

”.....”

I went silent and awaited Kouta-san’s words. Suzunashi-san did the same. It was suspicious whether Kunagisa was listening to begin with, but she was silent, too.

”– find the ***true suspect*** and prove your innocence.”

Kouta-san finally said.

“Then, Professor Kyouichirou would no longer have a reason to imprison you. Is that not right?”

”– ***true suspect***?”

The true suspect being the murder and crucifixion of Utsurigi Gaisuke. The person who created the reason for us being locked up like this.

”– that.”

I placed a hand to my mouth and thought. I repeated Kouta-san’s words in my head. Right. I had forgotten. In the end, **someone** had done that. Beyond just saying that the Professor’s reasoning was absurd, I should have realized this alternate solution. Yes. That way, by successfully finding an answer, I could crumble Professor Kyouichirou’s scenario.

This is an isolated location. A closed-off location. There are limited conditions. Then the true suspect. **If the true suspect is within**. Then. That would–

“That would certainly.....”

“Not a bad thought,” Suzunashi-san continued my words. “That is certainly not a bad thought. However, that’s also not practical. It’s cool to aim high, but we don’t have time. Kasugai-san said *a decision would be made in about five hours*. We’re done-for then. An hour’s already passed, so there’re four hours left. To figure out who the true suspect is within those four hours–”

“Four hours!” Kouta-san repeated Suzunashi-san’s words like a song. “Four hours? Does that not mean eternity? Rather, we have too much time,” and Kouta-san looked at me with a taunting expression. ”– right? Is that not right? Dear friend?”

”..... if **you** are going to help, then probably, Kouta-san.”

I nodded in disagreement and disagreement.

As Suzunashi-san said, the situation is dire. As sensei said, this was not just a vicious murder, but a physically sealed room – an impossible crime using a hard-locked room. A strict machine gatekeeper, and the reason for Utsurigi being crucified so brutally, and the meaning of the words on the wall. It seemed an overwhelming problem to begin with, and there was a time limit on top of it all.

However.

As Kouta-san said, that may be the best solution after all. Even if it may also be the worst solution.

"So? What shall it be? I shall not force you to do anything."

Said Kouta-san as she stretched her right hand out to me through the iron cage. Suzunashi-san no longer said anything. Kunagisa said nothing, too.

I resolved myself, and gripped that hand.

It felt like I had grasped the hand of a human being.

3

Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa stayed behind in the cage, and Kouta-san and I went off to **act**. It might be overstating things to say that we had split into a passive group and an active group, but there was no point in meandering about as a large group, and everyone agreed that at least someone had to stay in the cage. In that case, we could not just leave one person (there was no guarantee that Kasugai-san would return only four hours later. Once the *escape* is discovered it would not only be scary alone, but dangerous), and the outsider Kouta-san could not be tasked with remaining in the cage either (I suggested it but they turned it down immediately, of course), so the three of us – myself, Kunagisa, and Suzunashi-san – could only allow one person to leave. Suzunashi-san resigned ("because I'm stupid"), which left either Kunagisa or myself. Objectively Kunagisa is certainly smarter than I, but it would not be good to entrust her in the hands of a suspicious person like Kouta-san, and I could not imagine Kunagisa doing anything stealthy. No doubt, she would be discovered within two seconds of leaving the cage. As long as Professor Kyouichirou's aim is Kunagisa herself, as long as she remains in the cage then even after being discovered, nothing rash – yes, nothing rash – would be done. In that case, it seemed the only option was for me to leave.

After that logic puzzle similar to a *sheep and wolf and others crossing the river*.

I left the dungeon.

"– what nonsense."

I mumbled the usual line and faced Kouta-san. She pulled her cap down back over her eyes, and then said, "Please."

"Then shall we commence. There is nothing to be gained dawdling around in a place like this, after all."

"– indeed. I agree," I nodded, and then I turned back to the cage. "Well, Suzunashi-san, I entrust this place... or rather, I entrust Kunagisa to you."

“I can’t really accept the task with much confidence this time, but, well, leave it to be just a bit,” Suzunashi-san said. “Inoji. We’re placing our lives in your hands.”

I was entrusted with something insane.

Please, entrust, placing.

Hey, hey, this is almost like.

We’re trusting each other, or something.

“Ii-chan.”

Kunagisa said in a way that could be called abrupt.

“Worst case… when Ii-chan thinks there’s nothing left to do, you can call Nao-kun.”

”……”

Call Nao-san. I understood what that meant. If there is **direct** danger to Kunagisa Tomo, to have to depend on that person’s power.

”….. alright. I will do that. Really, as a last resort.”

“And, Ii-chan. Remember?” Kunagisa looked up at me and continued from her seated position. “What boku-sama-chan said a long time ago. That one of *Team*’s rules was to promise *never to leak info about other members*.”

”….. yeah, you said that. Speaking of which, I feel like you said something like that.”

“I’m breaking that promise.”

Kunagisa said.

”– yesterday, Sacchan said this. *I guess it’s time to* ***restore my reputation***.”

Restore my reputation.

Utsurigi’s reputation – *Green Green Green*. That was his alias and his handle when he was part of *Team* as the ultimate, tyrannically vicious destroyer. Did Utsurigi say that he wanted to restore that? That he was going to restore that reputation? Then. Why did Utsurigi Gaisuke, who is no longer here after being crucified, say that? However, no, more importantly.

“Why are you telling me that now?”

“I thought it wasn’t fair. I can’t say anything more because we don’t have time, but I wanted you to know,” Kunagisa said with a rare calm. “Hey, Ii-chan. Ii-chan won’t abandon **me** or hate me, right?”

“Of course not.”

I answered immediately.

I was able to answer immediately.

But it was probably not Kunagisa who felt relieved at that, but rather myself.

"Stop confirming such obvious things. It is quite bothersome to need to answer. **Something as pitiful as this** is nothing to us, Tomo."

"Mm. That's good."

And then Kunagisa laughed carefreely as usual. That was enough. I resolved myself and then said, "Shall we go then, Kouta-san." Kouta-san nodded and began walking, "alright, then let us begin with formulating a battle plan."

"Recognizing and confirming the current situation. We must leave this building and go outside for that."

"Indeed. I know I asked earlier, but Kouta-san, how did you get into this building in the first place?"

"I shall explain next. Anyways, come along for now."

I quickly followed behind Kouta-san, who marched forward. There was soon a turn, which took the cage, and Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san, out of sight.

That was around when Kouta-san began giggling.

"– what is wrong?"

"Nooothing. Quite well. Would it be friendship, or would it be love, or what would it be. The two are both quite attractive, dear friend, so which of the two are you after?"

"It is not like that, Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa both. I am truly after a samurai-like person who lives next door at my apartment," I answered in monotone. "And something like that is irrelevant to you, anyways."

"Fufu. Of course it has no relevancy to me. Everything about you is completely and irrelevantly unrelated to myself. That is certainly consummate. Yet even so, is it not normal to want to know more about the partner which whom I am about to share life and death, dear friend?"

"I have no intention of committing suicide with you, Kouta-san," I tried to act as uninterested as possible. "And on that note, it sounds like you know about me to some extent, but I know absolutely nothing about you. I cannot help but feel apprehension because of that."

“Apprehension. Very well. Please remain apprehensive. That is probably for the best,” Kouta-san replied, continuing forward without dropping her pace. “As long as you keep your promise, I shall say no complaints. What I want is not trust but honesty.”

“How pragmatic.”

“Just realistic.”

It was a conclusion to a truly pointless conversation. Part of me wondered if this was alright, and the other part felt that this was sufficient. After all, relying on this person was my only hope.

”– this way.”

Kouta-san pointed to a green, steel door. She unlocked the door with that knife, and then pushed the door. There were stairs leading up. From its position, it seemed these were emergency stairs.

”– you came from here?”

“Yes. The elevator makes quite a sound and echo. Using it would give myself away immediately. Now. Quickly. We have a time limit do we not? It would be consummate to hurry.”

After saying that to a hesitant me, Kouta-san began climbing the stairs. I could see that she was absolutely sure of herself. In other words, she had predicted everything that had transpired so far. That I would accept her request, and that I would dutifully oblige her, all of that had been planned. I shook my head lightly, and then took a step on the stairs. The door closed on its own, and the lock sounded. It seemed this door had a simple, automated locking mechanism.

“If I may amend one misunderstanding,” Kouta-san said. “You are correct in saying that most things have gone as I expected, but even so there was one thing that I can say was unexpected.”

”….. I said nothing.”

“I thought you would take a bit longer to come to this decision,” Kouta-san continued without responding. “Given your attitude last night. Of course, what happened is much more consummate; however, you do not seem the type to be this understanding. Despite the situation you were in, why did you accept my offer so quickly?”

”….. I have a friend,” I sighed before answering. “A person similar to you. No, you two are not similar at all, and, it is not as if I understand you, or

understand that person either, but your type... your positions, from a categorization standpoint, seem the same."

"..... hmm. How intriguing."

"Of course, that person is a contractor, a do-it-all sort of person," I said. "And not a thief like yourself."

"– fufu. I see. That is also consummate..... I am not that black-suited lady, but indeed, it seems you are quite well-connected. Regardless, it is splendid that we have come to an understanding so quickly."

Black-suited? Who? Ahh, Suzunashi-san.

We passed by the door to the first floor, and Kouta-san headed toward the second floor.

".....? Are we still going up? There is only an entrance on the first floor, right?"

"You are troubled because we cannot enter or leave using that entrance, are you not? If you cannot go through normally, then it is consummate to try abnormal means. More importantly... more importantly, as I shall put it, what do you think?"

"What? Please be clearer."

"Hmmmm. This incident... well, it is an incident after all. This incident, how confident are you that you can solve it safely? I thought I should ask that, first."

"We are already not safe. Because we were locked up in such a place already..... but anyways, confidence. If there is one thing I can say," I was not imitating Kouta-san, but I held my answer back a bit. "I have experienced this sort of pattern a few times. And I have never once been unable to solve the mystery."

"..... surprisingly confident. I am slightly surprised."

"Just speaking from experience. Just. ..... or rather, this feels lacking," I said without any emotion. "Compared to the incident that destroyed Kunagisa and I, this is really lackluster. To have an old comrade of Kunagisa have his eyes stabbed through his mouth stabbed through his chest opened his stomach stabbed his legs nailed his arms chopped off and crucified and decorated with a blood message, well it might score a sixty."

"That is still a passing grade."

"Perhaps. ..... however, this is the first time I have a time limit. Four hours.... or maybe less. We would have to return by then."

“If you are unable to solve the mystery within four hours, what do you intend to do?” Kouta-san asked. “Despite what I said in front of the black-suited lady, you should not rely on me much. My objective lies elsewhere, and our relationship is just an alliance, so we are not sharing life and death so much as simply traveling on the same boat.”

“I understand. Indeed, traveling on the same boat. Yes..... in the case that I am unable to solve anything.”

“Would you call... *Nao-kun*?”

Kouta-san lowered her voice just a bit.

“That is a last resort. No, if we are to call cooperating with you the worst case scenario, then we would call that one the lowest case scenario.”

If I were to choose that option – if Kunagisa Nao were to learn that his sister Kunagisa Tomo were being treated in such a way, this incident would be dealt with not within four hours but within four seconds. Nao-san would resolve this incident with every power he can access – no, he would **destroy** it, without a doubt. However, that. That cannot be allowed to happen.

”– if possible, it is not an option I would like to choose.”

”..... hmm? I do not understand... but it does appear you do not desire that option. Then, what do you intend to do? Would you call for that *contractor* you mentioned earlier?”

“That..... to be honest is also something I would prefer to avoid,” I answered honestly. “That has nothing to do with best or worst case, but rather, yes. I would prefer to remain that person’s friend. I want to remain **just** a friend with that person. I do not want to create something like debt or gratitude or anything of the sort, and I would like to avoid a business relationship even more.”

I said, but I have already actually been in her care quite a bit.

“If it were just helping Utsurigi, I would not have minded borrowing her hand, but with things having blown out of control like this it becomes harder to ask for help.”

“You do not want to bother that person because they are a friend? That is the opposite of my line of thought. What is a friend if one cannot help in a situation like this?”

“I have a lot of things going on.”

That sort of thing is difficult to define. It is vague and unclear. Yet the more you attempt to clarify it, the more it becomes difficult to grasp, and it is not something that I am willing to expend significant effort on in order to clarify. Particularly given my current state.

"To me, living is the same as being contradictory," I said. "I am glad I was able to become that person's friend. To be a friend of such a splendid person, to be able to talk about pointless topics, to be able to eat together, to be able to sleep under the same roof, to be played around with, to be teased, to be punched, to be picked on. Anyways, I am glad I am a friend of that person. That is why I want one day for that person to feel glad to have been a friend of mine. It is pointless, but that is all."

"– I see. ..... well, that is indeed consummate," said Kouta-san, who seemed for some reason pleased by my words, as she turned back a bit and looked at me with a glowing face. Surprisingly, that was rather, an attractive look. "Then, what will you do? If solving this mystery is impossible within four hours? To be clear, I would personally say that negotiating with that Professor would be impossible. To mollify that Mad Demon who even now is probably hammering away at his dodgy dealings."

"..... you were listening to us?"

"To an extent. That Kunagisa-san is being looked at as a replacement for Utsurigi-san, or something."

"Is that so. How astude, really... yes..... in that case, there is no other choice. I will give up."

"What a lie," Kouta-san immediately responded. "You do not look the type to give up so easily."

"Is that so. That may be true."

However, there was no lie in my answer to Kouta-san. It was entirely honest, entirely what I believed. Yes, in that case, I will give up. In that case, I will no longer attempt to resolve this in a clean manner. I will give up attempting to end this situation without dirtying my hands. I will not think to attempt to barely maintain this life of normalcy that I had kept for nineteen years, given the situation. I subtly made sure the knife in my pocket had not been taken away.

"Oh well. It is not consummate to keep dwelling on the case that the mystery is not solved. Let us think of more bright futures."

And then Kouta-san finished climbing the stairs. Finished climbing? In other words, this was the fourth – no, that is not right,–

"– the rooftop."

"That's right," Kouta-san nodded as she opened the door with that knife. "The rooftop."

I followed Kouta-san out onto the rooftop. It was still tiled, and there was a clothesline in front. It was probably put there for drying laundry. However, there were no traces of anyone having used it. Or rather, this place was so barren of human life that it was worth asking if anyone had ever set foot on the rooftop since this place was built.

There were puddles on top of several tiles. Remnants of last night.

This time I looked up and gazed at the weather. It was quite pretty. The vast expanse of greenery beyond the castle wall. This would be what they call picturesque: hardly any man-made objects in sight. Actually, it even begins to look unnatural because so much nature spread out before me.

Still, there was no time to be breath-taken by that scenery.

"Please don't go too close to the greenery. While the probability is low because none of the research wards have any windows, people walking between buildings can still see us."

So Kouta-san said, but she walked toward the greenery anyways. I was not able to understand the situation, and followed her.

"Um, Kouta-san. Are you going to say we are going to rappel down?"

"That is not a bad consummate, but that would not explain how I **got in**," Kouta-san said and then she stopped immediately upon reaching the edge of the fifth ward. And then she remained immobile. "..... well, please do follow after me."

She said that quickly, and then took a step back, and then with used the momentum to jump. Jump. in other words, right at the edge of the rooftop – or if I were to explain this even more precisely, one millimeter before the gutter draining away the rain water, Kouta-san leaped. What lay ahead. Was just, nothing, and.

The fifth ward.

With elegance that made me imagine a twirl-like sound effect, Kouta-san landed on the other side, and then turned to me. Her left and right braids fell on her shoulders a couple second late.

"– now, your turn."

“Now, your turn...” even I hesitated. “What do you mean *now, your turn*?”

“It is not much. A leap of just two meters is surely easy to an adult male, is it not?”

Two meters. Indeed, the distance between the fourth and fifth ward was probably around this much. As I had felt yesterday, the buildings in this facility were closely built, as if squeezed together. That was why jumping from one building to another was not impossible, as Kouta-san said. Still, even if it were just two meters.

I walked to the edge of the building and looked down. If I remember correctly, the fourth ward was four stories. However, each floor seemed to have been built taller than a normal building, so no matter how much leeway you gave, this building could not be shorter than some ten meters altitude. You would die even if you were to fall on your feet.

Of course, a two-meter jump is simple. However, if failure means death, it gains some pressure.

“My, my. I cannot imagine this to be the case, but perhaps you’re a wuss? Quite a surprise to discover that my dear friend was such a chicken.”

”..... how about the excuse that I am still underaged and not an adult?”

“If you want to say that you do not intend to break through the situation, if you do not want to show me that you are not a chicken, then by all means.”

Spoken that way, it seemed I had no choice but to resolve myself. Kouta-san only needed a meter’s worth of acceleration, but – and that was probably enough even for myself too, but – I took three, no four steps worth of distance, and then took yet another step back, and then I inhaled deeply, and then took another step back.

New genre: athletic mystery-solving.

”..... truly, nonsense from start to finish.”

I mumbled, and then I began running. There was no mistake that I could jump. From the fourth to the fifth ward, jumping itself is simple. So the problem is before that, whether I could time it right or not. If I were to trip, that would be the end of the volume. Perhaps out of that fear, in the end, I jumped ten-some centimeters before the edge.

After the feeling of having been freed from gravity,

I felt the impact along my whole body.

”– phew.”

I landed on both legs. In a crouching position, I existed on the rooftop of the fifth ward. At the very least, the story did not end in an unseemly way like a red tomato or a squished pomegranate.

Clap clap clap, Kouta-san faux applauded, and then said, “Magnificent, dear friend.”

“Around three meters. That far with that level of acceleration, hmm, would imply that you have a consummate level of athleticism.”

“I favor both athleticism and literature,” I gradually calmed by beating heart, and acted composed. I did not think there was any need to look cool about it, but, regardless of pride or self-esteem, I felt it would not be good to show Kouta-san much weakness. “So? Now that we are on the fifth ward, what do we do?”

“What do we do?”

“What are we doing next? If this building has a security at the entrance, then there is no change from the fourth ward. As you said we could do at the start, we did indeed leave the fourth ward... but if we took too much time, we might be found–”

– just as I said that to Kouta-san.

The door to the interior of the ward far in front of me slowly opened, and speak of the devil, Neo Furuara-san appeared. With his round body covered by a white lab coat, and with tobacco in his mouth, as naturally as can be, the door opened and he walked toward us.

I hurriedly tried to hide myself, but of course there was nothing between the door and here to be able to do that, and soon, I realized there was no need anyways.

Neo-san cynically smiled and said,

“Yo, Ishimaru-san.”

As for me, as for me who was supposed to be locked up in a basement, he gave me just a glance, and then he turned back toward Kouta-san, and toward Kouta-san, who was supposed to be an outsider and an intruder, Neo-san bowed deeply.

“I was supposed to greet you **here**, but things happened much faster than expected. Please forgive my rudeness in belatedly welcoming you.”

“I don’t mind,” Kouta-san answered calmly. “More importantly, please prepare something to drink for my dear friend.”

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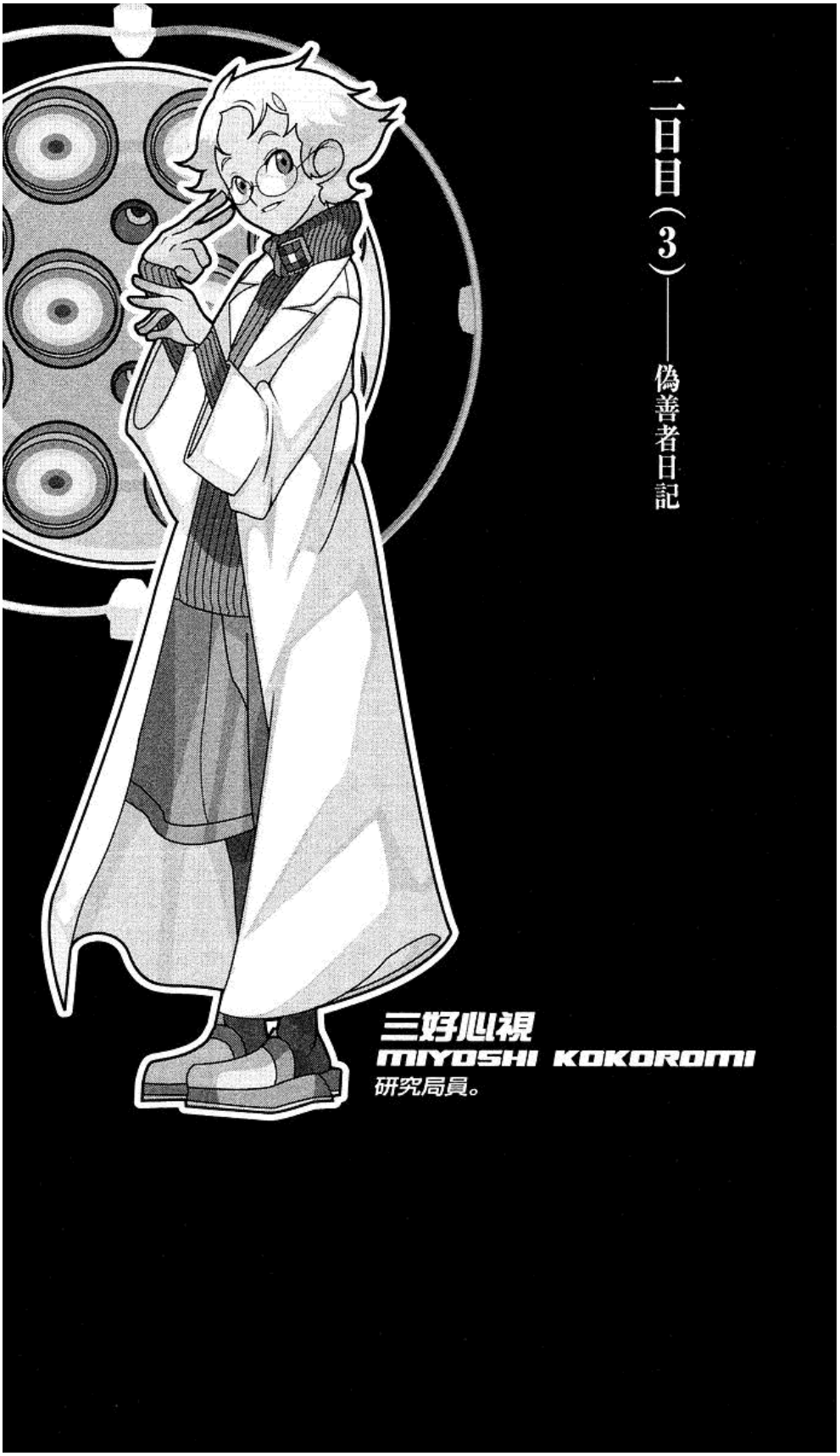
[1] https://www.maths.nottingham.ac.uk/personal/ibf/some.html
[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOEblmjfzAg
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PaRappa_the_Rapper
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldbach's_conjecture
[5] bootable business card
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariwara_no_Narihira



二日目（3）——偽善者日記

Day 2 (3)

Hypocrite Diary

0

I believe in God.
Because we've met.

1

It was one such possibility.

To begin with, why Kouta-san was able to invade this prison-like research facility so easily. And why according to the security guards the intruder had *already escaped the facility*, yet Kouta-san still remained within the facility bounds. There were other question marks regarding Kouta-san, and when it came to answer all of them, I had predicted to an extent that there must be a **double-dealer** within the facility, be it security or someone else.

However, I did not think the double-dealer would actually be one of the researchers.

While drinking a cup of coffee that Neo-san had filled with sugar, I observed him. I tried to be discrete about it, but Neo-san sensitively noticed my look, and laughed "fufu."

"What is it?" Neo-san said with an evaluating look and a condescending laugh. "Are you the type that dislikes coffee? I have some black tea, then. I'd really like to recommend some alcohol, but well, it wouldn't be good to paralyze your thought given what's coming."

"..... I am not fond of alcohol."

“Right, Miyoshi-san said something like that didn’t she. You downed a full bottle of vodka and got hospitalized for alcohol poisoning, was it? And you haven’t taken a sip of alcohol since, or something.”

So that instructor was going around spouting her mouth, after all.

”..... no, I like coffee. I actually prefer it black, but I do like sweet ones like canned coffee, too. Although coffee probably does not care whether I like it or not.”

“Hahah. Right. It’s rough liking them but not being liked back.”

Neo-san grinned as he responded to me.

“I can’t stand black. Absolutely can’t. I wish I could exterminate everything bitter and hot from this world. If I were to ever become embroiled in a religion, the deity’d have to say coffee beans are impure and cannot be eaten.”

”.....”

The fourth floor of the fifth ward. Neo Furuara-san’s private room. It was not created to look much like an academic’s room, and instead, yes, it felt more like a room of a medieval noble, as befitting the man himself. A wine cooler, a luxurious sofa, what looked like a mahogany table, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and all four walls were covered with paintings. And those paintings were nothing ordinary either, being works that seemed like they would be found on a brochure for an art gallery. They were counterfeit of course, but they spoke words of his tastes.

“Hm? Interested in the paintings?” Neo-san asked. “Although it embarrasses me that they’re all over the place.”

Indeed, there seemed no relation among the paintings. Landscape to portrait to abstract, impressionist to cubism to surrealism, and even to automatism, anything went. I felt like he could even open an exhibit here if he wanted.

“Do you like paintings?”

“Although painting does not seem to like me back,” Neo-san smiled a bit happily. “Liking something and being bad at it, or what do they call it, a young monk can read sutras he’s never studied? When I was a student, this being around middle school, yes, I once tried to paint.”

“Huh,” I felt like his two phrases meant very different things, but I did not feel that pointing that out would lead to anything, so I let it slide. “So, how did that go?”

“Absolutely terrible. It was quite different looking and doing. I intended to draw a self-portrait, but my art instructor commented, *hmm hmm, this is, right, what is it, would it be, yes, an abstract landscape, it is quite, unique.*”

”.....” I could not laugh, having had a similar experience. ”..... and so you transferred to becoming a scholar?”

“Hahah. Don’t look at me like that. You looked at the Professor the same way, didn’t you? Scary, scary. Don’t you understand? I’m a friend, a friend. I even gave you coffee.”

“A friend.”

What was most important here was which side Neo-san was a friend to. At the very least, he is not the Professor’s friend. That is the truth. But to conclude that he is a friend of mine would be being simple-minded. And to say that he is a friend of Kouta-san would be jumping to conclusions, too. From how the two interacted, I could not imagine there to be much trust between the two. I took a sip of coffee, and played with the taste in my mouth a bit before gulping everything down. I felt like my body warmed up from the inside out.

“What are you?”

“A direct question..... fufu. I shall answer that question like this,” Neo-san said as he stretched his arms out in a very old-fashioned way. “An expert at whistle-blowing! A professional at betrayal! A specialist of intelligence! A copycat of corruption! That is myself, Neo Furuara!”

”.....”

“Don’t slide away like that.”

“Of course I would slide away,” I slid away like five kilometers. “So in other words, you and Kouta-san are co-conspirators, and you two are spies from a rival organization or something that wants to snoop around this research facility?”

“A little different. Ishimaru-san and I aren’t really accomplices. Well, the two of us are more like aftermath associates..... that’s a bit tough to explain, though,” Neo-san seemed to struggle with explaining as he spoke. “It’d be better not to probe too much about me. Your lifespan’ll shrink if you learn too much, really. Well, isn’t it enough that I’m not really a person on Shadou Kyouichirou’s side, and more a person that’s able to help you out?”

”..... it probably is.”

Neo-san's objective was probably somewhat similar to Kouta-san's objective. However, as opposed to Kouta-san, who was acting solely on personal will, Neo-san seemed to be for some sort of organization... he seemed to be acting on behalf of some sort of organization set up in opposition to this research facility or the organization above. In other words, the Kunagisa household. After all, Neo-san seemed to be plenty settled in and prepared – given that he is infiltrating as a researcher, and the timespan of his operation seems to have been much longer–, and by contrast Kouta-san was not as well-prepared but she had more maneuverability. It was probably that sort of partnership.

However, as Neo-san said, it was indeed probably better to act like I knew nothing of the two. Considering the lack of time, I did not have the composure to bother with organizations or research results or profits or things like that.

"– however..... you've caught the eye of quite a troublesome person."

"Troublesome person? Do you mean Kouta-san?"

"Who else? It looks like dangerous people take a liking to you," Neo-san said with bemusement. "Well, there was no helping it this time, but you should really let this be the last time you run into Ishimaru-san. I can't even begin to imagine why Ishimaru-san came to help you, but this is a warning from a senior. Fufu, do you think it's nothing to worry about? Indeed. Compared to the past... compared to when I first came into contact with her, Ishimaru-san's mellowed a lot. However, I know when she used to be called a Seven Spear[1)].....''

Based on what he said, I could imagine Neo-san and Kouta-san seemed to have run across each other before. In that case, it would mean Neo-san was not just any insider, and that Kouta-san was not just some sort of industry spy. I definitely wanted to avoid stepping too far into this topic, but at the same time, I do not know if I will be allowed to avoid the topic. Because there was no assurance that this was unrelated to this Utsurigi case.

"Anyways. What're you going to do now?" Neo-san asked and returned to his other mood in a blink. "To be frank, this problem is on a class of its own. What the Professor was saying was absurd, but it's also the only solution that currently exists. Can't call it the most applicable, but it's not a bad answer for mollifying everyone. The security system is the biggest

obstacle, after all. Card. Number. Retina. Voice. ID number. And then the log that's supposed to be kept in the mother computer. You're probably suspecting one of us, but that's a tough call, too. I still think an outsider did it. Then of course, they'll have left the mountain by now, so solving this within four hours would be impossible."

"– it's not a good show to intimidate a child."

There is no need to explain who the voice belonged to. All of a sudden, Kouta-san appeared, standing behind Neo-san with a bundle of papers. She truly left no presence. Neo-san seemed accustomed to this, as he looked unsurprised, asking without turning around, "Yo, Ishimaru-san. How long have you been there?"

"Beginning when you were giving a warning as a senior. Yes, let us engage in deep discourse over our difference in opinion regarding that topic at a later time, Neo-san. More importantly, dear friend, here."

Ishimaru-san first sat next to Neo-san, who sat across from me, and handed me a bundle of papers that she had been carrying. Unintelligible English and numbers were sprawled across in a mind-numbingly endless set of rows. No, this is not English. This is a programming language, or perhaps more accurately computer language.

"What is this...?"

"I went ahead and printed it out, just in case. The logs kept in the mother computer," Kouta-san shot Neo-san a look. "... Neo-san's computer was so pitiful that it took me quite some time. ..... ahh, around there. The records from last night. The four-digit number records the time, and the labels next to it refer to the various research wards."

I listened to Kouta-san's explanation, and confirmed the logs while sighing. However, all this meant was that the Professor was not lying. Indeed, last night, no person other than Kasugai-san left their own research ward, and even that Kasugai-san only walked outside for roughly five to ten minutes. Given these records, the Professor Kyouichirou and the researchers all have an alibi. Using process of elimination, the Kunagisa Crew was clearly the most suspicious.

Things did not look well.

Hmph.

Process of elimination.

"..... how about the possibility these were tampered?"

“They can’t be tampered with,” said Neo-san instead of Kouta-san. “We don’t have such skills. This includes the Professor. Utsurigi-san might have been able to, but his specialization is different – he specialized more in the software side than the hardware side, after all – plus, Utsurigi-san was the one who was killed. Miyoshi-san and Kasugai-san work in different fields to begin with, and Koutari-san is more of a researcher than practical application. OOgaki-kun and Uze-san have pretty high skill levels but those lay in completely different areas.”

”– the others aside, would the Professor not be able to? He is the *Mad Demon*, after all. As long as his name is not just for show, he should be able to do at least that much.”

“Let’s make one thing clear. Kunagisa Tomo is a genius. And Shadou Kyouichirou **is not** a genius. This difference is larger than you think, Mr. Lover.”

”.....”

“Yes, the Professor is not a genius. Of course, you... and myself, and our sort of level wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between the Lady and the Professor. The two of them both look like geniuses to us. There are **only a few** human beings that can tell the difference between the two. And the Professor himself happened to be **one of those few** human beings. And wouldn’t that be why, because the Professor realized he’s not a genius, wouldn’t that be why he diverged from the artificial intelligence research he’d been doing his whole life, and created this **idiotic** research topic?”

Idiotic research topic. It was probably so. However, if that were the case, then regardless of alibi, the Professor would have no reason to kill Utsurigi. There was no meaning in destroying your own research.

“Human beings are like that, you know, life forms that love looking down on others. Even though we all know that the world isn’t fair and equal. Isn’t that right? You could ask anyone and they’d answer the same way. It’s a commonly-used analogy, but try asking someone, *do you think not a single person exists in this world that is inferior to you?* You won’t find anyone that’ll nod their head.”

Neo-san seemed to be having fun.

Neo-san said nothing wrong. There is only one top, and the rest are countless bottoms. That is how this world is built. That said, it was not something enjoyable to hear.

“I guess we went on a tangent? But you know, there’re too many black boxes in this system. Not just the security, but including the mother computer. Black boxes. That means the only one who can dig inside is the original creator, the Lady of Kunagisa.”

”... so we are not just talking about things not looking well,” I tossed the papers on the table. ”..... and when it comes to computers and such, all I can do is throw my hands up in the air. I do not specialize in them at all.”

“Huh,” Neo-san seemed amused. “Then, what is your specialty? You’re Miyoshi-san’s apprentice, so perhaps dissection?”

”..... I did not like dissection much. By the way, Neo-san,” speaking of dissection. “What happened to Utsurigi-san’s crucified corpse?”

“Hm? Ahh, exactly what you just thought. Oogaki-kun and Uze-san carried it to the third ward... to Miyoshi-san’s research facility, and Kasugai-san and Miyoshi-san are performing autopsy on it together. Cause of death and time of death, and that sort of thing.”

“I see.....”

I thought. Information regarding Utsurigi’s corpse. I definitely wanted to get my hands on that. In the morning, I was so surprised at what I saw after entering the room, that I cannot say that I was able to grasp any concrete information. And it was not like I had gotten a close look. That was why I must take another look at the brutalized and dismembered Utsurigi body.

And the other thing was that we could not forego investigating the crime scene. There was a need to re-enter that room where Utsurigi had been crucified and comprehend the situation. To re-enter that barren room with the blood message.

I needed to do these two things, however, I did not know how...

“More importantly, dear friend, do we not have a matter to be settled?” Kouta-san spoke to me while I was in thought. “Something that must be settled first and foremost, for as long as we are cooperating.”

“What is it?”

“Whether to prioritize you or myself,” Kouta-san raised a finger in a lecturing pose. “Whether you shall give me your **information** first, or whether I shall aid your true-seeking and then receive your share afterwards. The pressing matter of order.”

“Ahh.....” that is right. There was that problem. “That is a problem, indeed.....”

Of course, I would rather give my information afterwards. Not because of lack of time, but because it was my only wild card against Kouta-san. However, that was also true for her. Just because she were to aid me did not necessitate that I would hold up my end of the bargain. I had already turned down her offer last night, after all. It would be impossible for Kouta-san to trust me fully.

Perhaps Kouta-san thought the same, as we both fell silent for a while.

“How about flipping a coin?” Neo-san suggested to Kouta-san. “Time’s a wasting while you two stand around like this, Ishimaru-san. That’s no good for the boyfriend, either. And there’s no clean answer to that question anyways, so how about we just carelessly decide it with the even chance of a coin?”

”– I see. Consummate,” Kouta-san dug through her coat pockets and fished out what looked like some sort of medal. At the very least, I could tell it was not a Japanese yen, but I could not deduce where it could be from, and it could even just be an arcade token. “Well then, dear friend, would you like heads or tails?”

“That is hard to call fair,” I said carefully. “The person throwing the coin can control the face of the coin. I do not mean to be suspicious, Kouta-san – no, I am being suspicious, but I do not want to relent myself to a system that someone with even normal hand-eye-coordination can rig.....”

“Indeed that is so,” Kouta-san said without hesitation. “Then you may throw it. I shall choose. Wouldn’t that fair to you?”

”..... are you sure? What I just said works for you, as well.”

“I have one more coin,” Kouta-san said, and then she pulled a second coin from her pocket. “We shall call it heads if you’re holding it in your right hand. Tails if it’s in your left hand. How is that?”

Kouta-san then flicked the coin into the air, and then she moved the coin back and forth between her left and right hands. I could not figure out where the coin ended up.

”..... alright, then.”

I flicked the coin lightly into the air. There were no mind-games left – it was entirely a game of chance. I did not catch the coin on the palm of my hand, and instead let it fall straight onto the table. The coin bounced a

number of times, and then spun, and then in the end, ceased moving with the tails up.

Pascal[2] says fifty.

To express it in more precise terms, it is not exactly fifty-percent because there was the chance the coin might stand on an edge, but that probability was so laughably low that it was not worth taking into account, and it had already been avoided. I looked at Kouta-san again. She had a somewhat sarcastic grin as she slowly opened her left hand. Nothing was in her hand.

"..... very well. This is itself consummate. We shall prioritize you," Kouta-san stood up from the sofa, and then looked down at me for a moment. "Then, as a textbook step-by-step for this sort of case, let us hear an autopsy and investigate the crime scene. Utsurigi-san's body first, or the crime scene first. You shall decide."

I answered Kouta-san's gaze with my own and answered her question.

"..... indeed. Then let us – look at the corpse, first. The more time passes, the less information we will be able to get," I looked at Neo-san. "Neo-san, do you know what room Utsurigi's corpse is kept in the third ward?"

"Probably the seventh dissection room on the third floor. Because that's what she said. Um, what're you going to do?" Neo-san tilted his head to the side a bit as he asked. "You... or rather, you and Ishimaru-san have no means of entering that third ward, you know? The same way you don't have a means of entering the seventh ward. I can house you here like this. I can give you a hand with thinking, and I can give you information, and I can even give you a cup of coffee. But it's pretty tough for me to give you any more assistance. I'm in a pretty rough spot right now, too. You know that, right?"

"..... well, yes, I know that."

What to do. The first thing popped to mind was to ask sensei for help. But that was too risky and did not come with a high chance of success. The worst type of gamble. I could not imagine sensei, that none other than Miyoshi, the most self-centered in the world Kokoromi-sensei, actually worshiped Professor Kyouichirou or anything, but I also could not imagine that she would do anything to betray the Professor. She is incredibly talented, after all. She could not just be a normal hire at this laboratory. There must be some personal motive. And for that sensei who could not

possibly live a life beyond her own whims, not one thing could exist in this world that she would prioritize over her own goals. To hope that a once-student of hers had any had any modicum of value to her was a vain, futile hope.

”..... in that case, there is only one way.”

Kouta-san said toward me, as I thought. And then this time, without waiting for my reply, she turned to Neo-san and said, “as for you, in any case.”

“Please bother the Professor. Please circulate unnecessary errands and counterfeit information as much as you can. Please confuse him to incredible and incredulous levels and muddle everything up. That is your area of expertise, is it not?”

”..... hahahahahah” Neo-san replied to Kouta-san with an airy laugh. “Roger roger roger, Ishimaru Kouta-san. I do not know why, but it appears Ishimaru-san has some reason to take deep care of this young man. What is that *information* you want so badly, I wonder? Very well, I shall not ask. It arouses my curiosity greatly, but I shall not ask. Yes. Leave it to me, Ishimaru-san. This Neo Furuara shall put forth the little everything and anything that I have to provide assistance.”

“Consummate. Then let us go, dear friend,” Kouta-san said with a smile that seemed very out-of-place relative to Neo-san’s wording, as she grabbed my hand and pulled me up from the sofa. “It is time to depart on an adventure.”

”..... you seem carefree.”

“Because it is not of my concern. For now, anyways.”

“Young man,” Neo-san said with a hint of seriousness as I was forcibly dragged away. “Be careful not to be seen by anyone. If you are seen, it’s over. Thinking that Miyoshi-san is alright because you are old acquaintances, or that you might be able to persuade Oogaki-kun, or any soft thinking like that should be thrown away.”

“I am quite aware, on that at least.”

“Not just the Professor. Every person here has a fallen quality to them. Of course, that includes myself as well. Right, be careful especially of Kasugai-san.”

”..... Kasugai-san?” I was a bit surprised by that. “Why? It seemed like Shito-kun and Misachi-san would be more warranting of worry...”

I felt like the two of them, who maintained respect toward the Professor despite being the recipients of such illogical violence made them all the more dangerous.

"Those without any conviction are the most dangerous, here. Think about it. Why did the Professor place you all - or rather, the Lady of Kunagisa, not in his own research ward, but rather in Kasugai-san's? Of course, part of it's so the blame doesn't fall on him if you guys do manage to escape. But more than that is because there's an **objective** belief that Kasugai-san would **never** betray the Professor. I can understand it, because I'm a professional at betrayal. Because I operate under the premise of betrayal, I can understand with absolute conviction. Kasugai-san won't betray. Because they aren't even **cooperating**, to begin with. Oogaki-kun and Uze-san have a reason for their adulation of the Professor. Respect toward the Professor, repaying of favors from the Professor, and so on. However, that's why all you have to do is **provide them with more**. For example, you could wiggle yourself in while they have a bit of shock over their treatment from the Professor, or something like that. There're plenty of ways to get someone to turn coat. But Kasugai-san is different. The reason she's here is *just because*."

"Just because...?"

Neo-san grinned at my response.

"Yeah. Hey, can you imagine anything scarier? Can you imagine anything more terrifying? A human being that operates without any conviction and without any reason. She has no reason to adhere to Professor Kyouichirou. Not one reason. She's just here just because. That's why it's impossible to warp her actions. Because there's no reason for her to be assisting the Professor, so there's no logic that you can use to shape that. You can multiply zero with anything and you'd still end up with zero, and you can't divide from zero. What could you call this but fanaticism?"

"....."

Kasugai Kasuga.

I thought back on my conversation with her last night.

She said she would opt to *not choose*.

She who is nothing, without liking or hating or being normal or being pleasant or being unpleasant or being indifferent.

She who is nothing, *just because*.

But at the time, I did not truly understand what Neo-san meant. I definitely understood that Kasugai-san was warped in some way, but I could not imagine her to be that much of a threat. I felt like Shito-kun and Misachi-san seemed far more fitting for the term fanaticism, and I could not feel any fear at this point from the arbitrary phrase *just because*.

Kasugai Kasuga, *just because*.

Is that not an issue that did not need fretting over?

– but I would find out in these few hours. That a human being that had not an ounce of conviction could become an object of terror just by existing the way they are in the world. I would experience first-hand that there are no answers to someone who is not a problem.

2

And then Kouta-san and I returned to the rooftop of the fourth ward.

”..... what are you going to do?”

“Of course. You want to go to the third ward, don’t you? Then there’s a route, right there. The one and only route.”

Kouta-san pointed toward nothing but air. The space between the fourth ward and the third ward. I eye-balled the distance as roughly four meters... three and a half meters at the very worst. It was close to a meter, no, more than a meter longer than the distance between the fifth and fourth ward.

”..... jump, that? Again?”

“It is consummate if you would prefer not. It shall just be game over, as you please.”

”.....”

I stuck just my head out from the edge of the rooftop and looked down. Yes, no matter how many times I check, we were at least ten meters from the ground. I could say that with certainty because my eyes were both 20-20. This one was one of those times I did not appreciate my healthy body.

”..... it is at least three and a half meters, you know?”

“Even high school girls can jump that far,” Kouta-san said lightly. “An early-growing elementary school child can go four meters. Incidentally, the current male world record for a full-sprint distance jump is eight meters and ninety-five centimeters, the female record would be seven meters fifty-centimeters. It is less than half of even the female record. There is no way you cannot jump that, is there?”

At the very least, please do not compare me to a world record. And while those people may have spent their lives jumping, they were not staking their lives jumping. The risk of dying from failure, or at least becoming heavily injured placed a greater burden on me than I would have expected.

“I do not think it a good idea to sit around in one spot for too long. And there’s no saying that Utsurigi-san’s corpse will be stored in the third ward forever. Once enough proof – by which I mean plenty of proof that

works in the Professor's favor – it would not be surprising for it to be cremated. That would be the end. Yes, by which I mean not you, but Kunagisa-san. A dead end."

Bringing up that name left me with no choice. I mumbled, "jeez" in an exaggerated way, and then took my distance from the edge. This time, I took extra care and set up for twice as much running distance. That said, if I took too much distance and used up too much stamina by the time I jumped, that would not do, either.

"– leaving me side, can Kouta-san jump that?"

"Easily."

Kouta-san laughed with plenty of confidence, and pushed the rims of her glasses up. Based on her attitude, this was probably easy for her. In that case, I should just worry about myself. It would be alright, as long as I got enough momentum, there was no way I could not jump a mere three and a half meters. As long as I concentrated and made sure I did not step off the edge–

I took a deep breath and then took a step forward. My seventh step took me just before the edge, and I launched with my eighth. I arched my body like a bow – focused my eyes on the sky – and without taking a second, soared through the air, and then, landed. I was able to land.

"– phew."

I turned around, toward the rooftop of the fourth ward that I was just on a few seconds ago. By the time I finished turning, Kouta-san was in the air. And she landed on the rooftop of the third ward before I could adjust my sight, and the momentum carried her laced boots forward by her heels, and then she stopped.

"—- fufu," Kouta-san maintained her slightly-bent-backwards posture as she laughed toward me. "We may be a surprisingly fitting couple. We must be the only pair in the entire world enjoying this sort of acrobatics together."

"I would not say I am enjoying this..."

I said, but I was bothered more by that my landing spot appeared closer to the edge than Kouta-san. She was tall, although not to the same degree as Suzunashi-san, and so her long legs may have been working in her favor for jumping, but this was probably not a case of build but rather athletic talent.

“What is it? We must hurry. You are short on time, are you not?”

“Ahh, yes....” but I thought of yet a different thing and froze in my place. “Kouta-san. Just a thought, but..... would we not be able to enter the seventh ward using this method, of jumping from rooftop to rooftop?”

Kouta-san looked surprised for just a moment at my suggestion, and then she quickly replied, “I think that’s impossible.” While it was not an immediate response, I could not understand why Kouta-san brushed that thought aside so quickly, so I could not help but sound like I were cross-examining when I asked, “And why is that?”

“I would prefer if you didn’t get so excited over this, it’s quite unruly. Were you like that when you tried to chew up Professor Kyouichirou?”

“That... no, I am sorry. I was rude, I apologize.”

I obediently lowered my head.

Yes. What point is there in getting over-excited? Even if Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san’s lives were endangered every moment we wasted like this, getting hot-blooded would not solve anything. Rather, the opposite would happen. It is because of the situation we are in, because of the position we are in that I must always have a cool head. I must be my usual, emotionless thought machine. Like a robot without a soul.

“However, what makes you brush it aside so quickly...”

“Do you think I hadn’t thought of that? Jumping from roof to roof like Lupin III, do you think I’ve lived a life where I’ve not at least once resorted to such a course of action?” Kouta-san turned her back to me and headed toward the door while replying. “Anyways, it would be impossible for you to do that. I shall explain the reason a later time. For now, is it not more important to look upon Utsurigi-san’s body?”

”..... alright,” I nodded, not entirely appeased, and then I followed Kouta-san. “However, if this is impossible.....”

I had felt as if I had finally come across the light at the end of the tunnel to this difficult case, but perhaps it was just a wrong hunch. For a moment it was like the completely, physically sealed-off seventh ward had shown just a crack.

Kouta-san opened the lock of the door and said, “but the problem is not just that sealed room, is it?”

“The reason that Utsurigi-san was killed in such a brutal way. And the words written in blood pique my interest. If you focus too much on one

thing, you'll stop being able to see where you're walking."

"..... indeed. That is true."

I looked at my watch again. There were roughly three and a half hours left. I could not say I had plenty of time left. However, the amount of problems to think about boasted an absolute superiority in numbers. To be honest, there is not much hope. However, as long as it is not zero, I must continue on. This was certainly a pessimistic perspective.

I walked down the stairs after Kouta-san, and then realized one more thing. It was unrelated to the incident, and was about the gamble with Kouta-san earlier. The front and back of the coin. It ended with my victory, but was it truly my victory? Kouta-san definitely had nothing in her left hand. However, that did not mean that the coin was in her right hand, because she did not show it. It was worth wondering whether both hands were empty. The thought that Kouta-san had passed the advantage to me because of my time limit felt so steeped in sentiment, however, that I could not bring myself to ask about it. Instead, I asked a completely different question: "What does Neo-san do?"

"Didn't you ask him?"

"I did, but I felt like he did a neat job of making things ambiguous. Or perhaps he simply parried me aside entirely..... he said something like being an expert at whistle-blowing and a professional at betrayal and a specialist of intelligence and other such aliases that sound like lies."

"And, what did you conclude of him?"

"..... well, I think he must be some spy from a rival organization."

"That answer is not consummate. It's like saying *everything that swims in the ocean is a fish*, and indeed, I can only call it three-summate or four-summate."

"Uh huh," I did not understanding that grading scale. "Then, what is Neo-san?"

"This is just between the two of us, okay?" Kouta-san paused going down the stairs, placed her index finger to her lips, and then winked. "He's not something as mellow as a spy. And all of his aliases that he used to refer to himself are not lies but rather the truth. Indeed, you could call him a plenipotentiary ambassador that an even larger group..... no, a circuit dispatched, someone several times greater than a spy."

"..... I wonder about that large circuit."

“That would be how scrutinized it is, the research Professor Kyouichirou is performing right now.... although Utsurigi-san passed away, so I should call it research **he had been** performing. Of course if he is to resume the research using Kunagisa-san then that correction is unnecessary. And that would be up to you. For example, the ER3 system you used to belong to is also probably interested in Professor Kyouichirou’s research results. Yes, of course that place would be.”

”..... and, yourself, too.”

Of course, Kouta-san seemed to say with her mischievous grin, and then she began walking forward again. I decided to avoid pressing further, and simply followed. We passed by the fourth-floor door, and then arrived at the third floor. Kouta-san waited for me in front of the door, and then taking care not to make too much sound, opened the lock with her knife.

“What room did he say?”

“The seventh dissection room.”

Kouta said as she turned the knob of the steel door and pushed it carefully, peering through the crack at the other side. However, she also then closed the door that moment. It was such an instantaneous action that it was like she did it out of reflexes, and it was astonishing that even then the only sound that could be heard was the automatic lock being set.

”..... what happened?”

“It is not consummate, as two women walked out of what is likely the seventh dissection ward.”

“Two? How did they look?”

“They both wore a lab coat. One wore round glasses, and the other seemed like the cool type.”

They were unmistakably sensei and Kasugai-san. The other woman would have been Misachi-san, but given what Neo-san had said earlier, and especially given that they were in lab coats, Misachi-san could probably be excluded.

Kouta-san crouched on the spot, and then placed her ear to the door. I had no reason to do so, but I did the same, anyways.

”..... ..... ya know ..... ”

”..... ..... the worst .... ”

”.....is..... hard word.....ya know.”

“It’s the usua .... bothersome..... ”

I could not really hear them. There was probably quite a bit of distance between here and them. However, I could slowly hear their voices better. That meant that they were walking toward us.

"But, even so. What's the Professor thinkin'a'doin' with the three?"

Kokoromi-sensei's voice.

"What he is going do it rather obvious I would think."

Kasugai-san's voice.

In that case, it seemed I was correct in deducing that the two Kouta-san said she saw were Kokoromi-sensei and Kasugai-san. I glanced at Kouta-san, who because of my posture sat right in front of me. She nodded back, and we went back to putting an ear toward the two's conversation.

"It is as forced a method as always. I think. I cannot think of it as an act of an adult with an academic background. I cannot think of him as having ordinary nerves considering that it is already savage to imprison such children in a basement and then to frame them as murder suspects on top of that."

"Pretty surprisingly normal opinion. Well, that's that, what ya'd expect of a *Mad Demon*, I guess. But I can't say I don't get the Professor's feelings. It happened right after the three of'em showed up, ya know? Regardless of logic, ya can't say they're not suspicious, yah?"

"Such suspicion is quite unlike you Miyoshi-chan. One of the three locked up in my basement cage is even your pupil is he not?"

Kasugai-san spoke of people like things.

"Wouldn't Miyoshi-chan want to cover for him? Speaking of which you were one of the first to stop him when he became infuriated."

"Ahh. Well that, ya know, came from experience. He's pretty calm most of the time but whenever anyone says something that hits in a bad spot, he starts rampaging. Most people who've staked their lives on academics, or ya know, most smart people're kinda like that, but he's a wee bit different. Anyways, he's always had a short temper. Especially his first year around. I had to go in to stop him every time, ya know. What a handful of a student."

I had many things I wanted to say back, but I stayed silent.

"Well, that's what made him cute the way he's cute, ya know."

"Really? I've become a bit disappointed."

"Hmm? Whazzat, Kasugai-chan not fond of hot-blooded fellas?"

"I cannot stand hot-blooded men."

“Kasugai-chan’s tastes are really strict, ya know. Well, I gotta agree that one’s absolutely bad, ya know,” what sensei calmly said rather harsh things about me, under the assumption that I were not around to hear, and then she continued. “But ya know, he’s not just bad. Nah, he’s pretty fundamentally bad, but his adaptability is bad, too, and he’s also got bad potential, and his badness isn’t half-assed at all, ya know. He’s so bad that he’s gotta be the first and last and unprecedented, the master of one and nothing at others, the type that you’d tell him to go right and he’ll go left, an innovative level of badness. Well, not that I’m trying to praise him, ya know.”

No worries, you’re not praising me one bit.

“So he doesn’t cause one bit of worry to Miyoshi-chan.”

“Well, I’m not worrying, that’s for sure. If anything I’m actually expecting him to do something. All we’ve gotta do is sit tight. While the Professor and Shito-kun and Uze-san come up with a countermeasure... and a countermeasure is all they can make, well, anyways, during that time, he’ll probably find a way to solve this incident.”

“Solve? He?”

“Yup. He’s at his best in this type of environment... or rather, ya know, he’s the absolute best person for these situations. Nah, might be better to say this sorta situation is optimal for him. And to add to that, this sort of situation’s his arch-nemesis. He’ll make something happen and solve it, ya know.”

“He is your pupil after all.”

“Pupil. Captivating way to put it, but irrelevant this time, I’d say.”

Sensei laughed and deflected that subject.

..... speaking of which, their voices were not getting closer or getting further, and it felt like they were just standing there, so I wondered what the two of them were doing. There should be no reason to stand by an emergency exit and talk, but if there were to be a reason, could it be that the two of them had noticed us? No, in that case they would not be engaging in idle talk, and would simply open the door. That they did not meant that they did not notice us.

Then I realized. When we entered the seventh ward yesterday while Utsurigi was still alive, there were stairs next to the elevator (that according to Shito-kun Utsurigi-san had let off on)). If this third ward was

designed the same way, there should be an elevator shaft nearby. In other words, sensei and Kasugai-san were not standing in front of the door, but simply waiting for the elevator nearby.

In that case, this was a chance. The two of them would be leaving this floor soon. In other words, it would not be difficult to sneak into the seventh dissection ward to see Utsurigi's corpse.

Hmm, things were looking up for us. I may be lucky this year. Though we were already in the second half of June. Though I had already been nearly killed several times these six months.

"Even so he is locked up in my cage. Optimal and arch-nemesis don't matter at all then. Or are you saying he's like Houdini?"

"If anything he's more the type to flip his thoughts around. He'll be like *I don't know. I don't get it. I don't get it at all. I don't get it so much and I don't get it so much that I'm going to die if I don't get it one more time but I don't get it after all so I'm dead* for the most part, and then because of something small, he'll be like *that's it! this is it! why didn't I get something so simple! I'm so stupid! So stupid so stupid and so stupid so I'm dead!*"

"So he dies either way."

It seemed I die either way.

"So he's not like Houdini. He's not a manipulator either, but he's not like a close-range power type, either, so ya know, yeah, I guess if he's locked up even he can't really do anything."

"How about an electric chair type? Then there is no point in hoping for anything," Kasugai-san said without any trace of emotion. "Well that's not something for us to bother thinking about anyways. We can just leave everything to the Professor."

"That again. Kasugai-chan always ends up there. *Leave everything to the Professor*. .... I don't dislike that part about you though, Kasugai-chan."

"What do you mean by that part of me Miyoshi-chan?"

"Leaving everything to someone else because you don't feel like thinking, not choosing to do anything at all."

I could hear sensei laugh, but Kasugai-san said nothing.

I remembered Neo-san's words earlier and paid even more attention, but in the end, the two of them did not say anything important afterwards. They simply spoke about meaningless and hopeless topics, such as:

Ya know, I get that kokkuri-san[3]'s written with a fox for the ko and raccoon for the ri, but what's with the ku?

If I remember correctly it should be dog.

Why would ku[4] be a dog[5]?

Different way of writing it. The same way that you would write snake[6] differently [7] in Ba Zi [8].

Gotcha..... but isn't it odd that you'd have a fox and a raccoon and a dog?

The common link between the three is that they all appear in mountains in the wild.

So it coulda been a monkey.....

Or:

Ya know the phrase "adding insult to injury" gets used a lot, but if ya think about it, shouldn't it be "got insult added to my injury?"

Indeed "adding insult to injury" is usually used with the speaker as the victim. Perhaps half of it has been abbreviated similar to "cut the Gordian knot." As such the correct way should in fact be "insult added to my injury."

Hmm. Then ya sayin' it's like "catch them in the rye field?"

Speaking of which during my intern years I had a friend who'd studied abroad and he shouted "This translation is wrong! it's absolutely wrong! This isn't what Salinger meant when he wrote this! I understand how Salinger felt! I'll translate it properly for Salinger's sake!" and then he penned a novel titled "Catcher in the Rye Field."

How'd it go?

It was worse.

And so their conversation went. Come to think of it, the two of them sounded much more passionate during their idle chat than they did when they spoke about the incident.

The elevator arrived, and I could barely hear the sound of the door opening.

"Well then I shall be heading on ahead, Miyoshi-chan."

"Yah. What's Neo-san want with Kasugai-chan anyways?"

"He said something about an emergency with the model skeleton he's working on right now but it's obviously a lie. However I cannot just brush aside the request of a senior. Although I would prefer to go back to my own research ward."

"I see. Neo-san..... well, whatever, ciao."

And then the elevator door shut, and I could feel the vibration of the electric motor.

I stood up at that timing, however Kouta-san didn't stand up. With her ear still on the door with a serious expression, as if the conversation between Sensei and Kasugai-san was still ongoing, she maintained that pose.

"……..Kouta-san? What are you doing?" I asked in a low voice. "Even though Neo-san gave us a chance…… can you hear something?"

"I cannot hear anything."

"……then, what are you doing?"

"I cannot hear anything, dear friend." Kouta-san whispered again. "Why do you think so? From that conversation, Kasugai-san descended to a lower floor alone. Miyoshi-san is still on that floor. There is no sound. It is weird, isn't it?"

Having that much explained, I finally understood. We cannot hear anything. That doesn't just mean that we cannot hear the conversation anymore, there is no sound at all. Not even footsteps. In other words, even though Kasugai-san left, sensei hasn't moved even one step. Why is Sensei still in the same place without any reason?

Why.

"Don'tcha think you can come out soon?"

With a voice big enough that even I who didn't have my ear stuck to the door could hear, Sensei said.

Kouta-san also seemed surprised by that voice and took some distance with the door.

"If ya run away and hide like that, it will make ya less of a man. My pupil."

"Sounds like a line I heard somewhere."

Kouta-san sarcastically scrutinized me with her eyes. I averted my eyes because of the embarrassment of my act being seen through.

We were noticed……. really? Did Sensei really notice our presence long ago? Knowing that Kouta-san was on the other side of the door, she exchanged that conversation with Kasugai-san? ---no, that's not possible. No matter what, Sensei shouldn’t be inhuman enough to sense people through an iron door. At the very least three years ago.

"Won'tcha come out? I don't really mind, you know. I will just go report it to professor. If I called wouldn't he come immediately? Won't he come at a speed equal to a race bike? Then wouldn't it be bad even for my pupil?"

Kouta-san questioned me 'What should we do?' with her eyes. Since I can't continue averting my eyes forever, I reluctantly said 'It can't be helped.'. Shit, even though it was just for an instant, I was stupid for thinking that there could be something like luck in my life.

"Kouta-san should return to Neo-san's building."

"---and leaving you behind?" Kouta-san shrugged. "I really can't think that you will be fine."

"I am already not fine."

It was the second time I said that line to Kouta-san. Accelerating, exponentially, I became more and more not fine.

"Teeeen! Niiine! Eiiight! Seveeeen!"

Sensei began to count down in a big voice. With a tone as excited as if she was welcoming the new millenium. I thought that a lot when I was overseas, but what kind of vocal cords does this Sensei have? You should dissect your own throat.

"Siiiix! Fiiiiiive! Fooour! Threeeeee!"

"Kouta-san. If I don't return in thirty minutes---"

"Understood." Without hearing until the end, Kouta-san agreed. "However, at that time the contract between you and me will be broken, so I cannot guarantee anything. For me, I don't mind if the one I have a contract with is Kunagisa-san. But for now let's keep that contract."

"Right. The wonderful thing about contracts is that it doesn't matter even if they are broken."

"You say a lot."

Then, Kouta-san handed that knife to me, and asked 'Do you understand how to use it?'.

"Yes. I used one in the past."

"That is consummate. Then."

When I received the knife, Kouta-san nimbly rushed up the stairs. After confirming I couldn't see her anymore, I inserted the blade in the door lock hole, and spun it two, three times. Soon the sound of the lock being unlocked.

Pulling the knob, I came out to the other side.

"Twooo! One! Zero! Minus---"

"Why do you continue after zero?”

"Oyo."

Confirming my presence, Kokoromi-sensei stopped her loud voice.

"---what? So ya were really here. Kokoromi-sensei is big surprised."

"....." So it really was a bluff, you bastard. "Hello, Sensei."

"Hello. .....oops, that reminds me we haven't been alone together since that hospital room, my pupil."

Sensei pulled up her glasses with her hand, then smiled mischievously. More than mischievously, in a ill-meanned manner, if a cat tormenting mouses had an expression, it would surely look like that, that kind of smile.

A kind of expression only forgiven for girls before their puberty.

For example like Kunagisa Tomo.

".....haha." Seemingly not being able to endure it anymore, Sensei began laughing. "Hahaha! Hahahaha..... hahaha! Good. You are. Really, good. Truly a deeply interesting character. If your brain was a little bit better, you would surely have done better..... or maybe if it were a little bit worse?"

"Sensei. I have a request."

"Hmm?" Sensei tilted her head playfully. "..... ya're awfully honest. Kokoromi-sensei is big surprised, for the second time."

"Could you not tell anyone that you met me?"

"Yes. It's okay." Sensei easily agreed. "I won't be too cold. Isn't it between you and I?"

"....."

To Sensei's words, I had no choice but to be careful. Normally I would be relieved here. I would have to bow my head, and thank her like 'Thank you very much.'. Even I know that much manners. Maybe I would have to be moved by that affection. However the opponent is no one other than the great teacher Miyoshi Kokoromi. She is not soft enough that this paradigm would work.

"Alone---"

Without even trying to understand what I was thinking, Sensei said something sounding like talking to herself. Crossing her arms, with a pose like she was thinking, sometimes looking at me.

".....no, maybe two. Yes, the skeleton is two people."

".....?"

"Three would be perfect..... but that shouldn't be the case. If ya have that much ya would have to wander around, and being too many would be a problem....."

"What are you talking about? Sensei."

"Unya unya. What, who Ii-chan's cooperator is among this facility." Sensei returned her wrists and created the shadow of a fox. "At the very least there is one to open your cage. Since it's impossible for Kasugai-chan....., who can it be? But just that would be lacking..... so maybe two?"

".....I would want to praise your deduction, but it is absolutely completely wrong. Sensei." I confidently put out a front. "Everything was by my own power. In reality I had supernatural powers."

"That's the first time I heard that."

"Sensei was the first one I said it to. It's a secret between us, okay?"

"Well it's fine. I won't ask what ya don't want to say. For now."

Saying that, Sensei flipped her white blouse and began to turn her back. It looks like I couldn't fool her. Sensei stopped after walking about five steps and said "Come.".

"Didn'tcha came to pay respect to Utsurigi's body? My pupil."

"....."

"Don't be so wary. It's not like we don't know each other."

"If we didn't I wouldn't be so careful....."

"You say skillful things as usual. Hahah."

Not answering to my sarcasm at all, she continued to walk. That being said, Sensei was short so her steps were small too, so even my timid steps were not so far behind. With a stature not inferior to Kunagisa, next to Suzunashi-san far from an adult and a child, it is more of a giant and a midget. No, this doesn't matter for now though.

Sensei stopped before a door with a plate with written on it 'Seventh Experiment Room' (furthermore the writing was so dirty that it was barely visible. As long as it wasn't created by a preschooler, without a doubt Sensei did it.), then she turned back to me, and said "In the first place.".

"In the first place what is a genius? My pupil."

".....a difficult question. Let me see, to answer that question we must first think about what a genius means."

"Are ya Descartes?" Sensei inserted a retort of philosopher."Also there isn't any difficult question. Though there are difficult answers."

"A line I heard a lot."

"Exactly. In the first place it is from the best luck of the law of big numbers. Geniuses are not raised, they are born--- that's tha line of Fraulein Love, but don't ya think it fits perfectly? For you, the boyfriend of Kunagisa, you should understand that well." Sensei narrowed her eyes. "---haha. Ya were noisy about that in that school, about what she did. Well, you don't matter anyway though. So what's your answer?"

"I don't know, that kind of thing." Still not understanding, I gave a non-answer to Sensei. "Genius are basically smart people or skillful people, right? I think that is enough commonly."

"Commonly?"

"If you are not satisfied should I correct it to ordinarily? In the first place I am not a genius so it doesn't matter how I define it."

"You say that, but for those geniuses--- Kunagisa-chan, professor, Utsurigi or anyone is fine, but--- for them it is normal, they couldn't care less about the definition of geniuses."

"Sensei, what are you saying?"

"Nonsense. Of my own taste." Turning the knob, Sensei pushed the door. "Then, welcome to my castle."

A dim--- no, completely dark room. Since there is no windows, no light comes in. Sensei entered the room without turning the lights on. Since I didn't know where the switch was, I followed her while being careful to my steps. The faint light coming from the hallway was useful, but for some reason (maybe just simply the hinge being tilted), the door closed on its own, and true darkness enveloped the room. Everything, me included, became jet black.

"Wait--- Sensei? Sensei? Where are you?"

No answer. But there is a presence. Somewhere not far from where I am, I can hear Sensei breathing.I don't know what's her objective--- but if she is the Sensei I know, that objective is certainly evil--- it seems Sensei didn't intend to answer me.

I advance relying only on my instinct, but of course if you set aside the bad feelings, I was extremely dull, so I hit something within three or four steps. From the height it must be a table, however it was not supported by legs but by a stand. So it may be an operating table, or---. After feeling a bit what was on the table, I touched something soft and solid. It didn't have

any elasticity, but it felt like jelly. What can it be? That exquisitely warmness..... ah, I have a guess.

It didn't have anything to do with my guess, but at the same time the light of the ceiling turned on. It seems Sensei pressed the switch. And as I thought, in front of me there was a big autopsy table, on that table, on the tip of my arm, Utsurigi's naked body was enshrined. No, since he was facing upwards enshrine is weird, but in this case the choice of word didn't matter.

"....."

Utsurigi's body was, probably by Sensei's hands, patched in some places. His shredded torso and stomach was sewed together, his opened mouth was forcibly shut so I couldn't see the wound inside. There was nothing that could be done to fix his eyeballs and eyelids, both were gouged out which offered a creepy sight. Compared to that inexpressive face, his severed arms were much less creepy.

Good grief. It's hard to think this was the frank Utsurigi. There isn't even a sign of that, is there?

"I guess it's as expected that you didn't even raised a scream." Sensei who had turned behind me before I knew it said as she approached my back. "As usual, despite being cute you're not lovable."

"And as usual you have bad taste, sensei." I took my hand off Utsurigi's body and turned towards Sensei. "What meaning is there? For this action."

"There's no meaning. There is just an action. For everything."

"Don't try to dodge the question. I don't get what you are saying."

"In other words, a clockwork orange."

"I don't get it even more."

"It's what is commonly called a metaphor, my pupil." Sensei turned around the autopsy table and positioned herself facing me on the other side of the table. "More than a metaphor, a metaphor." (Tl : she just said the word in english this time)

"Isn't it the same?"

"Fufun. The belief there is completely different." Sensei said something incomprehensible. "Essentially a problem of assumptions. More than that, it's now the time for extracurricular lesson. Kokoromi-sensei's dissection lecture is starting. Now, my pupil, comment your impressions upon seeing Utsurigi Gaisuke's corpse."

"Hmm. Let me see, from just seeing, umm, he is dead."

"Failure." As expected the evaluation of the dissection specialist was harsh. "For my failure of a pupil I will change my question. This, what do ya think was the cause of death?"

"An hemorrhagy cause by excessive bleeding, isn't it? Sensei, didn't you say that yourself?"

"However that was wrong." Sensei was tapping Utsurigi's cheek with her fingertips. "The cause was brain destruction."

".....brain destruction? What do you mean? Is it like a cerebral contusion?"

"Wrong. Brain contusion refers to when the brain is damaged by an external wound. Look, the scissors are shoved in, aren't they?"

Saying that Sensei made a peace sign, of all things she inserted those two fingers in the cavity of Utsurigi's eyes. Does that person have no respect or sympathy towards the dead? She probably doesn't.

"And that was pretty deep. It was stabbed to the root, do you remember? The blade passed through the brain and reached the thalamus."

"Well, I could guess that the blade reached the brain by just looking, but Sensei, then..... wouldn't that mean that there's a possibility it was stabbed by the scissors not when he was dead, but when he was still alive?"

"Not just a possibility. The first ever wound was the brain destruction by the cissors. Thrusting the scissors frantically and sloppily turning it around. For ten seconds, or five seconds."

It was a story that made me hurt just by listening.

"Having his stomach shredded, his legs broken and his arms cut was after his death. There is the reaction of a living body, you understand, right?"

"---you know I was bad at human dissection, don't you?" I said without letting Sensei nor Utsurigi enter my field of vision. "In the first place, seeing a body that destroyed..... there can't be any sane meaning."

"Then why did ya came here?"

"I am searching for a trigger for inspiration. Since it is reverse psychology. Ah, no, was it electric chair style?"

"Now that you mention it. Then the kind Sensei will explain it to ya. I will temporarily stop asking questions and receive yours."

To Sensei's words, I couldn't help but step back. What is she planning? What in the world is she plotting? I was certain that she was planning or plotting something, but that being said I would step back. In this room only lighten by artificial light, it feels like time has stopped, but even now seconds after seconds were passing.

Only three and a half hours left.

"---the time Utsurigi-san was killed?"

"Today at just one i the morning." Sensei answered immediately.

"Is there no error in that estimation?"

"My instinct has no errors."

So it's instinct?

"Even if the instinct part is a joke, well, around one o'clock. Around the time Kasugai-chan and ya met."

In other words, it was impossible for Kasugai-san to commit the crime. None other than me is the witness. The only one who came out last night (though it was for a short time), Kasugai-san has an alibi, so it wasn't a fun development for me.

"Is it really true? isn't it some harassment against me?"

"Do I look like someone who would do that?"

"Do I have to answer? That question. Also, Sensei, even if that is not harassment--- maybe you are just following what the professor told you."

"The professor, huh..... you really are a doubtful person. Well, it's fine." Sensei answered just that to my doubts, without affirming or denying. "Anyway that's fine for the time estimate....., but the weird thing is after that."

"The weird thing?"

"His stomach and torso were shredded just after his brain was destroyed. That's why there was so much blood, but..... the arms."

Splat, Sensei hit the part where the arms were severed. She really does terrible stuff.

"These arms were cut off a few hours after his death. So he was crucifixed--- even after his throat and legs were crushed."

".....? What about it?"

"It's weird, isn't it? Why did they have to cut his arms at a different time and put him up for show? They should have done it directly after killing him. But there's a time lag between the time of death and the time of time

of crucifixion . Then, the culprit stayed for a long time on the scene for no purpose, didn't they? Why would they?"

"Why would they, you say....."

There is no way I would know that. Far from that, I don't even understand how that is a problem. Of course there is a difference between when he was killed and when the arms were cut off, but is there any reason for that difference to be several hours?

"Maybe it simply took a long time to destroy the other things? If you're talking about that, I am more interested as to why was the stomach shredded, why were the arms cut off and why was he crucified. More than the problem of time, isn't this important?"

"There is no reason. Because there is just an action." Sensei repeated the same sentence as earlier. "If there is a reason, sanity isn't a problem. It's not that if there is a reason, no matter what you do it's not a sin. It's just that if you commit a sin without reason, the punishment is huge. In the first place, there is still the question of why did they kill him, isn't is?"

"A reason for someone to kill..... I certainly thought that Utsurigi had reasons to be killed, but....."

"I thought I taught you in class, didn't I? The reason of killing someone emerges simply from interests or primordial lust, so you could say it is sane."

"Ah, thatanos, I see."

"It's thanatos, fool. What kind of villain would thatanos even be?"

"It's just that the alignment of syllables is hard to remember....."

The word thanatos that sensei talks about, in this case, roughly speaking, it is "I want to try dying once, but since I don't want to die, I will have other people dying in my stead"(really roughly), something like a common instinct of living things. Although I don't think it fits in this case.

For example, taking the dismembering killer as a representative of the reasons for destroying corpses, it would be a wish of domination against the opponent. That was the case for last month. Hurting a prey who cannot move as much as you want, dismembering them, collapsing their form. There is no other situation where you dominate the opponent more. About Utsurigi being crucified, if the culprit was someone with a strong craving for limelight, that may be the reason of hurting Utsurigi's corpse so much.

".....even then there is something strange, Sensei."

"Um? What?"

"Let's say this cut up corpse is fine. The arms being taken away too. Let's set aside the timing for now. I don't understand the reason about that part. However there is something I understand even less. The arms the culprit took, just where did they bring them?"

"--that's there."

As if saying 'Well noticed.', Sensei laughed boldly.

"Right. At the scene--- I mean the seventh building in its entirety, they weren't anywhere, Uturigi's arms. The left and the right arms. Unlike the eyes or the stomach, that was not just to hurt it. The culprit took them away. For this, I can't really say 'No reason, just acts'."

"....."

Listening to Sensei's words, I looked at the spot Utsurigi's arms were severed. The flesh exposed to the air already turned pure black. I wonder if Sensei cleaned it, the blood was cleanly washed away, though it didn't change its gore aspect.

"Why would them take something heavy like arms....."

"Want to test thinking about it romantically?" Sensei raised her index. "Utsurigi's hacker skill was first rate. The culprit was jealous and kill Utsurigi. Cause jealousy is one of the most common causes for crimes. The feeling of wanting to hurt someone emerges from the worries of the other person winning over you..... or maybe from belief being born from an complex of inferiority. But jealousy is a sort of envy. The culprit was admiring Utsurigi and was idolizing those arms of Utsurigi. Therefore."

"Therefore he took those arms as a memento? It's not Milo's Venus." I grumbled some nonsense to Sensei. "Let's think a bit more seriously, Sensei."

"The one who must think isn't me but ya, right? I'm not concerned aaat aaall."

It was a childish way of saying it, but she was right.

Having no other choice, I did was she said. A reason..... a reason to cut the arms and take them away, huh.....

"First for the candidates, I think the fetishes are important."

"Then it wouldn't change from what I said."

That too, was exact.

I should think a little more seriously.

There is an infinite number of interpretations for why they took those arms, or at least a number close to infinity. Although Kunagisa could cover all of those, it is impossible for me. Adding to that, I am repeating myself once again, but I don't have time. Then, I have no choice but to think arbitrarily. Essentially, like a mystery novel with heroism and logicism, let's assume this phenomenon is a hint leading to the culprit. About the fact that they took the arms away, that they didn't just leave it at the scene, an inevitable reason for that would be....

"From this way of dying--- I guess cadaveric spasms."

Cadaveric spasms are a form of post-mortem rigidity. Mainly coming with a violent death. For example there are the words 'A drowning man will clutch at a straw', it refers to this death phenomenon. Just before death, if a violent, destruction and harsh pain accompanies it, the dead will clench at what they are gripping with unbelievable strength. Since it happens when the body's limiter is removed, it could reshape a weak metal coin.

If you are wondering what this means, even if the victim dies after this, releasing this hand is extremely hard. Even using something like a bench or a bar, opening the fingers of someone weak is still a highly complex task.

For example strangulation.

When the neck is strangled (in other words it is death by violence), let's say the victim unconsciously grabbed the button of the culprit's coat. Ripping the button away and clenching it in their fist. It becomes a proof unmovable by anyone. Because unlike post-mortem rigidity, there is no way to disguise cadaveric spasms. You can be sure not at 100 percent but 200% that what the victim has in their hand is something that was at the crime scene at that moment.

So it is an extremely good proof for the ones investigating, but on the other side, it is a disaster for the culprit. They must avoid that at all cost.

Even if it means cutting that arm away.

"Certainly there was a case like that in the past..... the La Benshing case (TL : I can't figure out what this is meant to refer to), was it? Though I don't know much."

"I don't know the proper name either..... in that case, rather than than trying to open the arm of the victim, it is easier to take away the whole arm, isn't it?"

"But then ya would just have to cut the wrist, wouldn't ya? No need to cut from the shoulder."

"Isn't it just a camouflage? It would be too suspicious to just cut the wrists. I mean, the victim died from a blade stuck in its eyes causing brain destruction, didn't it? There is no more destructive and violent way of dying. It fulfills the conditions of cadaveric spasms. If we suppose that the button of a white blouse was ripped....."

That would be a motive sufficient to cut them. And even if there was no cadaveric spasms, maybe there was still something important on Utsurigi's arms. The culprit needed to take it away from the scene.

The crucifiction, the conspicuous way the body was shredded, it may surprisingly all be an attempt to camouflage the arms being cut even a little. Hiding a tree inside a forest. Hiding a forest inside a sea of trees. Isn't it just that?

"I see. That ritual-like blood writing would also make sense thinking like this. If it doesn't have any meaning, but is just for bluff. It's certainly incomprehensible, "You just watch, 'DEAD BLUE' !!", was it?"

"....."

Mm. Perhaps Sensei doesn't know that Dead Blue(Verge of Death) refers to Kunagisa Tomo? I see, Utsurigi uses that word only when talking directly to her, so it's no wonder. Though the slang Cluster has took place.

"Even then, you." Kokoromi-sensei tried to change the subject. "Earlier you said white blouse, didn't you? If you give those example, does it mean that? That you think that the culprit is among the staff?"

".....well yes."

"Even that part doesn't change. Hey, you. Don't you think that in reality Kunagisa-chan, Suzunashi-san, or those two together could have commited the crime? .....oh, don't make those dangerous eyes. How scary. Kokomin is scared."

Who is Kokomin? I don't know that person.

"Do you want to say that I am soft for my relatives?"

"Aren't ya soft? Ya got in a lot of suffering overseas. Don't ya ever learn? Don't ya ever learn the lesson?"

"Rather, this is just convenient for me. My only reason to move right now is to save Kunagisa, so it wouldn't begin if I started doubting her."

"Is it not that it wouldn't begin but that it would just end? For anything it is simple to just end it." Sensei said in a sarcastic tone. "Look, hypothetically, if Kunagisa were the culprit--- if that professor's deduction was right, what are ya gonna do?"

"I don't want to think about it."

"Someday a time where you will have to think about it will come." Sensei pressing for an answer. "If you think that the current vague relation will continue forever, you are greatly mistaken."

"I am touched from the bottom of my heart by your worries, Kokoromi-sensei. Even then, that part of you doesn't change."

"Um? What do ya mean?"

"The part where you talk like you know it all even though it's not your business."

"I think it's a thousand times better than a certain someone pretending to not know even though it's their business though."

Naturally, Sensei and I ended up glaring at each other. Invisible sparks were scattering around over Utsurigi's dismembered body. The first one to break that glaring was, of course, me. Sensei averted her eyes and in a small voice, "Sorry, I went too far.", she apologized.

"I will take that advice honestly. Yes, even I don't think that I will be able to stay like this forever with Kunagisa."

"I see. I guess so. That's how ya are. Even if you can see failure ahead, ya won't try to stray from that path, will you?"

"It's not something that cool. Essentially my brain--- no, my heart is bad."

"Heart, huh--- ihihi, like Magokoro?" (TL : Magokoro is written true heart)

"....."

"I see. Right. I feel like it's unnecessary but I was that's how it is. Isn't it fine....., look, I will go back soon. The professor called me. Ya can stay here as long as ya wish. Be at ease, I won't tattle on ya. Bye byekin." (TL : byekin -> baikin = bacteria)

Sensei went around the autopsy table then calmly passed my side. I grabbed the sleeve of that small white blouse and stopped sensei with that hand.

".....what? What ya wanna fight?"

"....."

"If ya have nothing to say, I wich you would take that hand of and let me leave in a cool way."

"Sensei..... what is your objective?" In a low tone, without turning back, I said to Sensei. "What are you helping me? No..... in the first place, why did Sensei left the ER3 System to enter this research facility?"

"Can't ya trust me?"

"Frankly yes. I can't trust Sensei at all." I continued without putting emotions. "Sensei has no reason to help me if it meant putting yourself in danger, no reason to risk having to leave the facility you left the ER3 System, there is not even a fragment of one."

"You said a lot, thank you." Sensei laughed a little. "Don't talk like people are all heartless."

"At the very least I think you are an advocate of purpose."

"I see." Sensei, once again, laughed lightly. "A bit of a shame. Sorry to fail your expectations, but it's really simple. I don't have a reason to stay in this facility anymore. Because the old guy Utsurigi Gaisuke died."

".....? What do you mean?"

"Literally what I said. Didn't professor told ya? If Utsurigi died, everything would be over, he said. In reality it's exactly as he said. So, Miyoshi Kokoromi is not free enough that she would stick in a finished place."

"But it looks like professor doesn't intend to end it now. He will start again--- rather, he will continue."

"Right, using Kunagisa Tomo." Sensei said. "But ya think so too, right? That this is absurd, ya think so too, right? It's just a desperate alternate plan. It's just a makeshift alternate plan. Well, it's true that Kunagisa would fit better as a sample than Kunagisa though."

"....."

"But that would mean making his backing, the Kunagisa Syndicate his enemy. I don't get what he is doing. Professor seems to want to make a deal with the Kunagisa Syndicate, but it's not the kind of organization where that would work. Right? That kind of organization should be behind your back and stay there. Even professor should understand that. Even though professor should be the one understanding that the most. Or maybe Shadou Kyouichirou was depraved enough to have even forget that..... I

am not kind enough to stay forever on a boat taking its heels. That's exactly as you said."

"So you want me to owe you a favor and this time have a direct relation with the Kunagisa Syndicate?" Sensei didn't answer. I was satisfied with her silent answer and freed her sleeve. Even then Sensei said nothing. I said nothing either. No one said anything.

The sound of the hinge opening, a few seconds later, the sound of it closing.

Then stillness.

In the autopsy room, only Utsurigi and I were left.

".....that, is it even nonsense, Utsurigi-san?"

I said so to Utsurigi-san.

Surprisingly, there was no answer.

---

1) This is a reference to the Seven Spears of Shizugatake

2) Pascal's Wager

3) kokkuri-san note the explanation about the letters that comprise the word in Japanese. As a TL note, I kept this "topic" literal because I couldn't think of a better way around it.

4) 狗

5) 犬

6) 蛇

7) 巳

8) Ba Zi calendar

二日目（4）——死願症

Day 2 (4)

Thanatophilia

0

A human being without a weakness is more dangerous than a strong human being.

1

Kouta-san was sitting by the stairs.

I froze in position when I opened the third-floor emergency door of Miyoshi Kokoromi's third ward building with the lock-picking blade and turned the knob. And then about ten seconds later I was finally able to pronounce, "what are you doing?"

"I was being told that the person I was waiting for would not come," Kouta-san said nonchalantly. "It is not consummate."

"..... then I have just arrived. However, you were supposed to be headed toward Neo-san's research ward."

"If you think about it, Kasugai-san is visiting Neo-san's place right now. Returning to such a place is not consummate."

Kouta-san stood up and patted away at the dust that had latched onto the bottom end of her coat, which she had ended up using as a seat. And then she stretched her back and cracked her neck left and right.

Perhaps she had been worried about me and waited there the whole time. That may have been the case, and there was also the same possibility that it was not the case. It was indiscernible. Either way, it would be the same possibility as a flipped coin standing on its edge. I said nothing and returned the blade I had borrowed to Kouta-san.

“So, did you achieve anything, dear friend?”

“Somewhat,” I closed the door behind me as I answered. “There was a bit of progress. However, that was all. I gained more information but I did not arrive at an answer.”

“Excessive information will simply get in the way..... well, so be it. If you may, allow me to hear.”

I did not think there was any reason to hide things, so I told Kouta-san everything, from the truths that sensei had told me about Utsurigi’s corpse to the idle talk between sensei and I. My explanation was lacking because I have a bad memory, but it seemed she was able to understand after just one explanation.

”..... the reason his arms were cut off.”

“Apparently the reason for dismembering a corpse is usually for convenience during transport or hiding, or hatred, or sexual desire. However, I think it is not entirely incorrect to reason that there must have been some cause to cut the arms off.”

”..... you appear to have said something like *we are not talking about the Venus de Milo* to Miyoshi-san, but what did you mean by that?”

Kouta-san asked me a question that I did not understand for a moment. And without understanding the intent behind the question, I simply answered, “No meaning in particular.”

“It is one of many theories that have been brought up with regards to the Venus’ arms. Kokoromi-sensei’s hypothetical reminded me of it, so I brought it up. That is all.”

“The theory about Venus I prefer the most is the default one, in which there were no arms to begin with.”

“Uh uh. What about that?”

“No, just idle chat. I’m just saying that regardless of how it comes about, the result is the finished product. The result – regardless of what that may be. Well then,” Kouta-san stared at me. “What shall we do next?”

“Next.....” I thought for a moment. “Let us go to the roofstop. There is no particular reason to stay here.”

“As you wish.”

And then Kouta-san fluttered her denim coat sleeves as she began climbing the stairs. I walked behind her. After climbing about ten steps, Kouta-san prefaced, “Along with idle chat, or perhaps as yet more.”

“Your teacher-student relationship is not distinct.”

She said.

“How should I interpret distinct?”

“It is a story about the ambiguity over whether there is trust. Although this is from my own perspective, in other words, being my personal opinion, despite all that you say and act, your attitude earlier belied certainty of safety. Somewhere, somehow you seemed certain that *sensei* would not warn the Professor about you, and would in fact even lend a hand.”

“That is a misunderstanding, Kouta-san. I simply had no other choice. Of course, the possibility of having things handled internally always existed, but it was still a dangerous bet.”

“That may have been the case, but it is hard to throw away the illusion.”

“Illusion.... there is a difference between trust and being absolutely certain of each others’ core behaviors,” I said curtly. “There was no one across the ocean that I got along with worse.”

“Across the ocean? You imply a great deal with that wording.”

“There is a fortune-teller that I get along with even worse over here..... compared to that, sensei is still on the cuter side. Anyways, that is how it is. The connection between sensei and I is as strong as the effect of the moon’s gravity.”

“That may be so,” Kouta-san quickly stepped back, as it seemed her interest was really just at an idle chat level. “Well then. There are now exactly three hours left for the time limit. How do you feel about the odds of triumph?”

“Unfavorable. It is like, please look forward to our next series.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nonsense.”

Come to think of it, I had once read a novel that had the premise of *please look forward to my next work*, and as I escaped from reality in such thoughts, Kouta-san and I reached the rooftop of the third ward. Kouta-san walked to the center of the rooftop, and then raised both of her hands in a banzai posture. Assuming she was not calling for a UFO, she was probably just stretching her back.

“All that said, the view from here is spectacular,” I said to Kouta-san for no reason. “A cryptomeria forest all around. It is enough to make me forget

what I am to do. This must be what they mean when they say it steals your soul away."

"I hate to ruin some poetic words," Kouta-san said normally. "But what you see is not a cryptomeria forest. It is mostly oak."

"Huh? Really?"

"Other than that, there are chestnut trees. There's some pine. There are other types mixed in, but there is no cedar."

"Is that so. Huh..... I had always thought all mountains had cedar."

"That is an intense misunderstanding. Is your brain alright? Well, not that the topic of trees is any relevant," Kouta-san turned to look at me. "Do you know what I am thinking right now, dear friend?"

"..... no. I do not know," perhaps she was thinking of my ignorance regarding mountain trees. No, of course she was not. "What?"

"I am admiring a bit. At Miyoshi-san's quickness at giving up."

"Ahh....." I nodded. "That is true. However you must agree that she is correct in doing so? Sensei is insightful when it comes to profits. She would not stay herself in such a place without having a reason."

"Unlike Professor Kyouichirou, you would say?" Kouta-san said. "Professor Kyouichirou seems to have quite a villainous role to you. Although I do not blame you after such treatment. However, that cannot be helped. After all, character is like a bonus part attached to the well-off."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a heartwarming story about how human beings first become a good person when they have composure. But everyone's quite pressed," Kouta-san said cynically. "True geniuses like Kunagisa-san and Utsurigi-san can of course be kind to other people. It is like that proverb *if I were Edison I could have been called the King of Invention, too*. Someone with a 10 billion does not feel pained in giving someone 10 million. Because even so, they are 9 billion 990 million better than the other."

"You are quite defensive of him. Even though you said this place was *like a graveyard*."

"My. You do know grave-robbers are the most profitable of professions?" Kouta-san boasted happily. "Well, in any case, *composure* is most important."

"Leaving Kunagisa aside – Utsurigi may have had plenty of composure, but he did not seem the type of person to be kind to others. He was the

detestable kind that put all of his composure into being nastier."

"If one can be kind, one can also be unkind. Such is the bliss of those who can choose. After all, having these things decided for you without giving you any options is a tragedy. Don't you think?"

"I do not think it is a tragedy. Just sad," I followed up absentmindedly. And then I changed the topic. "Sensei seems to have decided to leave this place already, but what of Neo-san? If what Kokoromi-sensei said is true, then it means he no longer has any reason to continue being a spy? And ..... what are you going to do, Ishimaru Kouta-san?"

"That is itself a superfluous worry. The three of us, Miyoshi-san and Neo-san as well as myself, have our three different objectives, so there is no need for us to walk the same path. And, Miyoshi-san already abandoned this place, but – and I suppose that could be praised as having a splendid eye – my personal opinion is that the Professor's plan is not that bad. While I shall not say it has a high chance of success, it also does not have a low one. And the merit in the case of success - Kunagisa Tomo herself - is unbelievably great. The risk has consummate value."

"Although that bothers us greatly," my voice had naturally become displeased. "Each and every one... is like a vulture. A sample, an experimental subject, a test body... really, are any of them human?"

"They used to be human. Before they became academics."

Kouta-san's sarcastic words sent a chill straight through my body. When it came to being inhuman, of those within this facility, was it not this one that was far and away the most befitting that term?

"Well, your *each and every one* may be counting myself. But that is also itself consummate. Well. In any case, shall we return to Neo-san's place and come up with a strategy? Neo-san may have come across some new information, and it would be good to know of the Professor's actions."

"....."

While I listened to Kouta-san's words, I was facing the complete opposite direction from Neo-san's fifth ward. In other words, I was looking in the direction of the second ward. In more precise terms, from here, I was visibly confirming the distance between here, the third ward, and there, the second ward. Kouta-san seemed to have noticed my look, as she walked in front of me and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"I wondered if it would be possible to go from here to the seventh ward."

”..... I think I said it is impossible.”

“I have not yet heard the reason for that. And, from the way I see it here, the distance to the second ward is roughly two meters. Around the same distance as between the fifth ward and the fourth ward..... no, this one seems a bit shorter. And then if I remember correctly, the next one, between the second and primary ward..... in other words the distance to reach the Primary Ward that houses the Professor, was not that great either.”

“You’re quite fixated..... would that not be more befitting desperation?” Kouta-san said with some bit of exasperation. “This is not consummate.”

“Then tell me. By what reason is it impossible?”

I could not see the distance going from the primary to the sixth ward, and then the important sixth to seventh ward because of the angle from here. Is Kouta-san saying that the distance is an issue? I did not know. However, Kouta-san was much more familiar with this facility. I understood, logically, that there was no point in refuting Kouta-san’s opinion when it came to the matters of *infiltrating* and *trespassing*. I understood, but.

“But, I cannot think of any other means of breaking into the seventh ward while avoiding its security.”

“Then it would be best you didn’t,” Kouta-san said bluntly. ”..... perhaps you may not understand through words, so I suppose you might as well experience it yourself. No action is wasteful to such a reverse-psychology person like yourself, and it is more wasteful to be standing here arguing.”

Kouta-san said, and then she walked toward the second ward, and with legwork akin to avoiding a puddle, moved to the rooftop of the second ward. I could not help but admire her boldness even though it was just a two-meter distance, considering that just slipping would be the end of her life.

I followed Kouta-san and moved to the second ward. Kouta-san walked quickly, and she soon moved to the other side, and then she waited for me. I caught up, and when I looked, the distance between the second and primary ward was three meters..... no, a bit less. Considering the air space between the fourth and third wards, this felt like nothing.

Kouta-san gave herself a bit of a running start, and jumped to the primary ward. It was readily apparent she was not giving it her all, and

with a light flight, she landed on the rooftop of the primary ward. As soon as she landed, she turned around, and silently waited for me. This had already become the fifth jump, and even I had started becoming used to this. However, I have also heard that it is once you get used to this sort of acrobatics that things become dangerous. I kept myself focused as I jumped from the second ward to the primary ward.

"..... this is a heliport," I mumbled with my toes pointed toward the big circle painted on top of the primary ward (which had a big *H* in the middle). "And a plenty large antenna.... despite its isolation, communication is not completely disconnected from the rest of the world....."

"Do you want to ask Kunagisa's brother or your acquaintance contractor now?" Kouta-san teased. "You may go ahead if you please. I'm sure they shall come helping immediately."

Kouta-san did not seem to pay it much heed, but that line seemed to insinuate that she knew Nao-san and Aikawa-san. Despite the suspicion, I decided not to pursue the matter. In retrospect I would think that I should have pressed the issue, but I am not deft enough nor superhuman enough to predict my own regrets. This is not yet the time for that, I lightly responded, and then I turned to the east. The fifth to primary wards were all lined straight, but the sixth and seventh wards had probably been architectural afterthoughts, as they were placed to the side. I looked straight ahead to the sixth ward, and finally to the seventh ward.

"Professor Kyouichirou and the others," Kouta-san stared at the floor of the rooftop, as if she had x-ray vision, and spoke. "I wonder what sort of evidence they are collecting in preparation for what sort of method to set her... no, to set Kunagisa-san up as the suspect. Fufu, even if we were to succeed in infiltrating the seventh ward, there is nothing to be done if we were to run into someone altering the evidence."

"There is no point in such negativity."

"Indeed. Let us leave such matters to Neo-san. Although leaving things to others is not your preference."

Kouta-san gave an out-of-place smile and then walked to the sixth ward.

"Yes – wait, huh?"

There was nothing like an entrance on the rooftop of the sixth floor. According to Shito-kun the sixth ward was a power plant – what sort of

power plant was it? A carbon power plant I think, or a silicon power plant. Or a nitrogen power plant? It was certainly one of those three, but I was not really listening, so it had become rather – vague, and it was not a place that people would enter and exit, nor would people hang laundry, so this should have been expected, but there was nothing like an entrance door on the rooftop of the seventh ward that I could see. Large water tanks were placed along the eastern edge, and there were some wide pipes connected to the tanks, but otherwise it was a clean, flat plain.

"Is this what you meant, Kouta-san?" I asked Kouta-san, stunned. "In other words, there is no entrance from the rooftop on the seventh ward–"

"There is," Kouta-san immediately responded. "Can you not see? How is your eyesight?"

"I have not had it measured recently, but I do not have any sense of it worsening, so it is probably around 20-20."

"Then you should be able to see. About three meters toward us from the water tanks. A round, steel plug that looks like a manhole? It's less an entrance and more an emergency exit, but we can enter the building from there."

Indeed, as Kouta-san said..... or rather, once she mentioned it, I noticed that door (if it could be called such). However, in terms of distance, because the sixth ward was still in between, it was hardly visible. How good must Kouta-san's eyesight be to be able to see such a thing so clearly? Her glasses must surely be fake.

"There is a separate reason for it being impossible. In any case, let us head to the sixth ward. It is easy for you to see up close."

Said Kouta-san, and then she jumped from the primary ward to the sixth ward. The distance was probably one and a half meters. It was short enough that Kunagisa could probably stretch herself sideways and become a bridge (although that is quite a terrible thing to imagine).

Without giving myself a running start, I simply jumped over. It was simple, but even so I felt a bit of fear when I glanced down. One would say to not look down in that case, but one could also say that is a mysterious thing about the human mind.

"So. Now do you understand?" Kouta-san had moved to the edge of the sixth ward and spoke without waiting for me to catch up. "The reason we can't use this route to get to the seventh ward."

”.....”

As I walked closer to Kouta-san, I gradually understood what Kouta-san said. After reaching around the center point of the rooftop of the sixth ward, I could do nothing but confirm her words. I had to confirm her words even if I did not like it.

”..... how could it be?”

Indeed, this would be... impossible.

The distance between the sixth ward and the seventh ward. Compared to the distance between the wards so far – two meters between the fifth and fourth, three and a half meters between the fourth and third, just less than two meters between the third and second, just less than three meters between the second and primary, and then the one and a half meters between the primary and sixth ward – this was on a different level. No, it was not really on a different level, but it was big enough gap that one could not be faulted for despairing and expressing it as such.

Five meters.

Five meters.....

“Is it not impossible?” Kouta-san repeated. “Now do you understand why I said we cannot use this route to enter the seventh ward, dear friend?”

“I see.....”

Five meters. That distance was such that it would be reckless to risk a life trying to jump across. Not even reckless, but simply a suicidal action. I am not familiar with athletic records, but based on what Kouta-san had said earlier, the world record was eight meters and seventy-five centimeters. Let us call it nine meters. The distance between the sixth ward and the seventh ward was four meters shorter. However, just as I had thought when she brought up that comparison, I maintain that it is preposterous to compare me to a world record. I am a Japanese, and my body is not particularly built. I am not as extreme as Kunagisa, but I am still an indoor person.

Five meters.

Truly, this is an unreasonable demand.

”..... well then, there is no point in remaining here any longer, so let us return to Neo-san, this time. There may yet be another route–”

As I listened to Kouta-san's not-really-placating words – no, I was not even listening to such words, as I thought myself into a rut. I simply, thought. Yes, this is an unreasonable demand. Solid and unparalleled, completely and utterly impossible.

"— — — -"

But that is why.

That is why.

The crucified Utsurigi *Green Green Green* Gaisuke. Both arms cut off, both eyes and even the brain behind them destroyed, throat slashed out, chest and torso cut open like a dissected frog, both crushed legs pierced. That truly empty, colorless and stateless room colored into an ammonia-smelling reddish-black atmosphere, and then on the wall was literally – truly literally – a blood-written message.

The research ward that was locked by an impenetrable hard security lock, the sealed room that was too large. There was no record of anyone entering. There was no record of anyone having even left their own research wards. The crime was physically, theoretically only possible for one, the administrator of security, Kunagisa *Dead Blue* Tomo, the leader and ruler of the *Team* and *Cluster* that rewrote the rules of Japanese cyberspace by fifty-five fold.

The *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility.

It was absurd. This was no usual incident. A crime so impossible that it left no space for argument, a murder so abnormal that it left no space for excuses, a phenomenon so paranormal that it left no space for retorts.

That is why. That is why.

That is why the answer to this incident must be psychological[1]. It is necessary. Not just the suspect behind this incident. I as the detective must also become psycho. I must be psycho. That is the premise of this logic.

A deep breath. Once. Twice. Thrice.

"..... hey. What are you thinking, dear friend?" Kouta-san said, suspicious. "I have a terribly bad feeling right now."

"You're on the mark."

The answer, from my position – toward the edge facing the seventh ward, roughly ten meters – I began running. I had no composure. I had no composure at all. I could not waste even a single centimeter of distance here. I thought nothing, I felt nothing, I forgot I was living, and I used

every bit of muscle in my body. My brain had long since stopped functioning. Like a soul-less robot, it followed orders.

Not yet. I did not jump yet. One more step.

"You – idiot!"

Kouta-san's shouting voice, changed from the elegant mannerism she had been using, for the first time carried emotion – and the moment after the insults washed over me, I stomped down with my left foot. I felt something, like molecular atoms, coursing through the center of my body, like all my blood was leaking out, like my head was being showered with liquid nitrogen. I had never experienced molecules coursing through my body or leaking blood or being showered with liquid nitrogen, however, probably, this was how that would feel.

In other words.

I was freed from everything.

I freed everything.

Unfettered.

This is dying.

This is dying.

This is disappearing.

This is vanishing.

This is ending.

Death.

Here. I can die. I can die. I can die with. I can die to. I can die it. I can die for. I can die too. I can die me. I can die of. I can die from. I can die more.

"That's why you–"

Like a revolving lantern, I was reminded of a line that someone had told me.

"– should just die."

Yes.

You are right.

2

.....

"Kusanagi? Kuginasa? What?"

"Kunagisa, it's Kunagisa. K U N A G I S A, Kunagisa. And then Tomo, for friend. Kunagisa Tomo."

"Hmm. I see. Kunagisa-kun. Huhhh, your head, it's pretty cool."

"You can call me Tomo."

"Alright. Then you can call me Tomo, too."

"That's confusing. I'm going to call you Ii-chan."

"Then I'll call you Ii-chan, too."

"That's confusing."

.....

.....

"That one's like a baby bird."

"Baby bird? What do you mean?"

"Do you know about 'imprinting'? They say when baby birds're born, they look at whatever thing they see that moves first, no matter what it is, and adore them as a parent..... well, it's a superstition."

"Are you saying that your sister is like that to me?"

"Yeah. Now you're Tomo's one and only guiding post. You're the one and only, irreplaceable. That makes me extremely displeased."

"This is not any pleasant to me, either."

"You've gained the right. The right to demand obedience from Tomo like a parent any way you wish. You've gained free ownership over Kunagisa Tomo."

"There are parents in this world who are killed by their children, Nao-san."

.....

.....

"Don't you wanna die? Don't you wanna die, and apologize? Don't you wanna beg for forgiveness?"

”.....”

“Then pray. Go ahead and pray. Cry, and beg for forgiveness, and pray.”

”.....”

“Like I once did toward Kunagisa Nao, plead to God or even Satan.”

”.....”

“If I’m to be born again, please make me a cat or a dog or something.”

”.....”

“A pig, a cow, even a monkey’d work. I wouldn’t even mind being a bug. Just make it so I don’t run into Kunagisa Tomo.....”

.....

.....

.....

I had lost consciousness for probably just a moment – truthfully an instant, just the instant that I had blinked. I was lying down on the rooftop of the seventh ward, on that unfinished concrete. Or truthfully, I was sprawled out there. I had probably failed at landing. My legs hurt a bit. However this was no doubt due to the impact of landing. In that case, the moment that I landed, because of the sense of security – or perhaps from despondency, I momentarily lost consciousness. I had subconsciously braced myself, and did not seem to be hurt in any hurtful way. Considering that I had been beaten up by Suzunashi-san and Kokoromi-sensei this morning, this was by comparison just a meaningless, dull pain.

“Well then – I must have done something bad in a previous life.....”

I survived.

I was able to jump.

I chewed on that as I slowly picked myself up off the ground. Or tried to.

”– I am currently exasperated beyond all belief.”

Sounded the voice from right next to me, and so my attempt to raise myself was halted. There was Ishimaru Kouta-san standing still as she let the rooftop wind play with her denim coat, glaring down at me.

”..... huh? Hmm, but.....”

I turned my neck and gazed at the direction I had jumped from, in other words, in the direction of the rooftop of the sixth ward. Kouta-san was not there. In other words, unless this situation was not a dream that I was seeing in the moments before failing my jump, it meant that Kouta-san had also succeeded in jumping to this side. While the former did not seem

particularly out of the realm of possibility (probably higher than the chances of a coin flip showing heads), this pain running along my body was unmistakably real. However, the phenomenon of phantom pain does exist in this world. I did not know for sure, so I decided to ask Kouta-san.

"I am living, correct?"

"It just means you aren't dead," Kouta-san answered coldly. "Because things that hurry to their deaths for no reason cannot be called living."

"I see..."

This time, I was able to finish getting myself up, and stood. Muscles, bones, ligaments, all green. I imitated a few stretches while I said to Kouta-san, "Did you jump across too?" Kouta-san did not answer. She just sighed.

"It may have been a failure on my part to choose you as a partner," Kouta-san said. "I did not think I would have to tag along with such recklessness. It is not consummate. Not consummate at all."

"However, now we have proven that you can jump from the sixth ward to the seventh ward – in other words, that it is possible to move across. All is well, Kouta-san. This means there does exist a route to the seventh ward, and that the sealed room state has been lifted–"

In other words, there is no longer any reason to absolve the researchers from suspicion. I had proven with my body that there was no need to bother with the one and only entrance, because one could infiltrate the seventh ward by jumping across the rooftops. There was no need to leave records of leaving your own research ward, much less records of entering the seventh ward.

Of course, all this proved was that anyone could be the suspect, and so it still left the suspect at large; however, at the very least, there was no longer any reason to suspect Kunagisa Tomo alone – or should I say no longer any just cause for this situation.

"There's no talking carefulness with you and your way of thinking, is there," however, Kouta-san's voice remained cold. It seemed she was extremely irritated at my going off on my own. "And all is well, on top of that? You make me laugh. I can't stop laughing, really. Perhaps you should get Kokoromi-sensei to dissect your brain once? It'll surely boast a different set of construction from other people."

“That is quite harsh of you... well, I will apologize over going on ahead on my own, but because of it, we were able to prove that what was supposedly impossible is actually possible, so is it not all good?”

“Does your normalcy not include allowing others to finish? When, where, and how did I ever say *jumping from the sixth ward to the seventh ward is impossible*?”

”.....?”

Kouta-san’s behavior finally made me feel doubtful – or rather, finally began to feel something like uneasiness. Indeed. To begin with, when it came to absurdity, this Ishimaru Kouta-san was doing something far more absurd. Infiltrating this research facility by coming right through the front door using the *Zerozaki* surname, being acquainted with the treasonous Neo-san, and despite having a reason for it, helping myself and Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san. The risks she faced were incredibly high. To insinuate that Kouta-san to think this – despite the possibility of death, this – level of danger was any obstruction was insulting enough for her to be miffed, is it not?

Then..... **there is something else**.

I thought that much, – I finally thought that much, and realized. I realized it. Right. A five-meter jump should be impossible for myself, given my lack of any training. Then why did I attempt it after calculating the odds? The reason. The reason that I had recognized, subconsciously.

I looked back at the sixth ward once more.

And then.

”..... ah, crap.....”

I see.

So that is why.

So that was why, Kouta-san.

I understood. I understood, completely. And then I felt exasperated. At my own personal idiocy, and at the *reason this route is impossible*, as stated by Kouta-san.

“It is not a hobby nor principle nor style of mine to bother people about what they’ve already done,” Kouta-san said coldly, behind me, “But please understand that we are now in an extremely tough situation, dear friend. If you are to go off on your own again in such manner, I will have to reevaluate our alliance.”

”..... indeed.....”

I nodded, and confirmed *that truth* again. I confirmed again because it could have been my misunderstanding. And then I confirmed that it was not.

The sixth ward was built **slightly taller** than this seventh ward. Or rather, the seventh ward was **slightly shorter** than every other research ward. From the sixth ward it was difficult to tell, but from this side – from the shorter side, it was clear that the roof of the sixth ward was slightly – even so it was still some tens of centimeters – closer to heaven. Then, what would that entail?

In other words, it means **jumping from that side to this side** becomes easier. Even if it were five meters in a straight line, because of gravity and jumping angle, I would get some tens of centimeters worth of assistance. That was why I succeeded in jumping. While it sounds nice that my cornered mind unleashed the full power of my body, this sort of realistic explanation felt more sensible.

Now, as for the jumping from there to here being easier this time. As opposed to the other research wards, what was meant by this seventh ward having a different height.

”..... **we cannot go back**.”

I mumbled.

I did not want to mumble, but I did.

“Correct, dear friend,” Kouta-san dealt a finishing blow. “That is the reason for this route being impossible. In other words, this seventh ward, which was probably built after the fact, is the only one in this facility that has a **different height**. The sixth ward is taller. Yes, if you were to return to the sixth ward, I would guess you would need to jump about seven meters?”

”.....”

“If you still want to try that, please, don’t mind me.”

“I will pass.....” I took a step back, and then I could not help but fall down on my butt. ”..... crap..... I was an idiot, Kouta-san.”

“It is consummate if you understand. Most things can be forgiven as long as they are apologized for,” Kouta-san shrugged her shoulders, and then finally removed the ice from her voice as she spoke in a brighter tone.

“And I recognize that my withholding information was one such cause for this turn of events.”

That was true, too. If she had not explained it as “you’ll understand if you see” and simply stated “the seventh ward has a different height, so you can go to but not back from the seventh ward,” this would have never happened. However, at the same time, this was still my fault for not understanding despite *seeing*. The only excuse I could offer was that blood had rushed to my head.

“In the end, the sealed room remains a sealed room.....” I mumbled with despair. ”..... however, maybe, one of the researchers has tremendous physical attributes?”

“Even if there were, it is not consummate, dear friend. There is, after all, one more reason that I stated this route was impossible. Do you not remember?” Kouta-san spoke. “Last night, when we met – it had begun raining?”

“Rain.....?”

I looked at the flooring on the rooftop. It was mostly dried, but indeed, there were still puddles that had been formed by rain.

Right. Rain. **It was raining last night**.

”..... ah,” why did I just realize that. “Ahh.....”

“With Miyoshi-san’s estimation of time of death being around 1 in the morning..... well, let us say they were able to get from the sixth ward to the seventh ward. However, didn’t Miyoshi-san also mention? The arms that were cut off were for some reason **several hours later**. In other words, the return trip.... after killing Utsurigi-san and then finishing the beautification of the scene, when they began returning to their research ward, would it not have been under rain?”

If that were the case, then what would happen. Simple. There is no way someone could perform the same feat in rain as without. And of course, they would not be able to beat their record.

I was careless. Too careless. If I had been even been able to remember that it had rained last night, I would not have been surprised by this route being deemed impossible. In the end, I am just a helplessly foolish idiot. I rushed, rushed, rushed, and then rushed myself into an irreparable act. Perhaps this stupidity could not be cured till death.

“What shall we do.....”

Rather than solving the sealed room, it had gotten even more sealed, and furthermore, we had become trapped within our own sort of sealed room. Of course, we did not have a card nor a registered ID nor knew the keycode nor had set up the vocal and retina check, and neither Kouta-san nor I had administration privileges like Kunagisa, so it would be impossible for us to break out through the front. At the same time, just because it was shorter than other research wards, I was not suicidal enough to ponder jumping off the rooftop. I did not know how it would go for Kouta-san, but at the very least she did not seem to have any wings. And this building had no windows. We were, in short, trapped.

"Two hours and forty-five minutes remain. We do not have much time to think," Kouta-san eventually said. "In any case, how about going into action? We can think about later some other time, so how about taking our infiltration into the seventh ward as a blessing – unfortunately it is debatable whether it should be called that rather than a curse – and check the crime scene, dear friend?"

"..... you are optimistic."

"Because it's not my problem."

Kouta-san said, and then she began opening the manhole next to the water tanks. Either due to rust or due to being set tightly to begin with, it did not open easily. I helped, and in the end, we were able to open the steel lid.

"There is no need to be so crestfallen, dear friend. There may be some strong rope in the seventh ward. There is nothing to say that there isn't rope strong enough to carry the weight of a person. In that case, we would be able to escape."

"Do you think there is?"

"Not at all," Kouta-san's placating was half-hearted. "Now, let's go, dear friend."

Regardless, that was all I could do. We climbed down the steel ladder and infiltrated the seventh ward.

3

Thirty minutes later.

Kouta-san and I stood in the tremendously odorous Utsurigi Gaisuke murder scene without sharing a single word as if we were simply, simply, obligated to be here for some purpose.

Kouta-san leaned her tall physique against the wall next to the entrance, arms folded, and closed her eyes as if she were thinking. If one were to see Kouta-san now, they may think her to be some sort of philosopher. Such was how calm, how transcendental she looked. By contrast, like a cat that had just been shaved, I was pacing frenetically around this room, this completely barren, this reddish-black, this crappily painted room. As if I were imprisoned by the uneasiness of possibly forgetting how to walk.

Shit. I did not think having a time limit for a problem would be this much of a pain. There were about two hours and fifteen minutes remaining. However, that leaned toward a best-case scenario, one in which we were given the most time possible.

This fourth floor of the seventh ward, after Utsurigi's corpse had already been carried off, this private room that belonged to Utsurigi Gaisuke, as if the dimension itself had been warped, only left an empty image. When I came here yesterday, when I came here this morning. In total, I had come here three times, and each time my impression of the room changed. I certainly did not like that man named Utsurigi, and I do not think I ever would have liked him, but I feel like the time when I came into this room for the first time and argued with Utsurigi was the least objectionable. And this third time was the worst feeling.

"– have you not learnt anything?" Kouta-san opened her eyes, and her mouth, for the first time in twenty-five minutes. "The remaining time is becoming rather not consummate, dear friend."

"I cannot see anything," I answered, and then I opened my mouth for the first time in twenty-five minutes. "Leaving the trick aside, I cannot see anything about the plot..... I truly, literally do not understand."

“Are you complaining?”

“I am being honest. I am concentrating this hard and thinking, and it seems something that even someone other than myself could think of. Yet nothing comes to mind. I cannot imagine at all of what the suspect thought of coming to this end.”

“Imagine what the suspect thought..... or perhaps they were not.”

”..... yes. Perhaps.”

Then it leaves me completely helpless. As a third-party and observer, even if I were to be able to track another person’s thoughts, I cannot track their ideologies. Cannot.

“Ritualistic..... or rather, it seems religious. Although I feel apologetic relating this to religions, the way Utsurigi was killed seems somewhat religious. In other words, this is less mysterious and more eerie. If it were mysterious, we must find elucidation, but if it is eerie, there is nothing that can be done. **That** was gruesome to that level.”

“Was it?” Kouta-san said in a surprised tone. “I have seen to this point much more gruesome corpses. I have also seen much more gruesome life forms. I do not wish to try to order them, but if I were pressed, I would say the decapitated head I saw two years ago was the most extreme.”

“A hanging corpse?” I was not really getting anywhere in thought, so I joined Kouta-san’s topic. “I have seen those, too.”

“No, a **living** decapitated head. A person living with just their head.”

“That is impossible? A person would die with just their head.”

“There is no problem as long as one performs proper medical procedures. After all, the heart is but a pump. The lungs are but oxygen supply tanks. Other internal organs can be simplified as nutrition creation factories. As long as you provide the brain with blood and oxygen and nutrition, one can live with just a head. Of course, there are no internal organs nor throat, so they cannot talk, but they can still communicate.”

”..... what is the purpose of that?”

“There is no purpose. Just interest. Are you not curious, yourself? Whether a person can live with just a head. I can understand that ideology, personally. Compared to something like that–” Kouta-san glanced at the opposite wall. The remains of Utsurigi’s crucifixion remained. ”– Mr. Utsurigi Gaisuke’s means of death does not seem like an illogical ideology at all. There is just logical ideology.”

Kouta-san pushed herself lightly off the wall, and opened the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I am being kind and giving you space. Is it not easier to think when you are alone?"

"Well, true..... still, where are you going, Kouta-san?"

"Have you forgotten about my real profession?" Kouta-san grinned audaciously. "I was able to enter the impenetrable seventh ward, after all, so I shall go scavenge. Things may have already been sorted, but..... well, I'll be back soon enough."

And then Kouta-san left the room.

"Real profession..... I am but a university student, though....." I mumbled, and then I moved to where Kouta-san had previously been standing, and leaned against the wall as she did. "..... why did things turn out like this..... what do things turn out like this, always always always."

I complained to no one.

"..... I am through with this. Really. I am through with this. I really am. I really am. I have had enough."

Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch. Sons of bitches more scum than people. Want me to just die here? Want me to just mix my blood into Utsurigi's blood? Take out the knife from my left breast-pocket and stab it into my abdomen and cut vertically. And then pull out my internal organs and scatter them. And then chew on my own liver to liven things up and then stab blades into these eyes that are not being of any use to anyone. Once they reach the brain my head will hopefully finally begin functioning normally. And then cut straight down the skull just like that past the throat and slice the collarbone and sunder the ribs and then reach the aorta, and if my strength and consciousness last, to the heart. I would certainly put forth a grand display of spurting blood. The problem is whether this knife has that much durability. However, even if it did not, I would still die. And then if I were to be born again this time I would study and study and study and become a researcher. I would become a researcher and then construct a research facility deep in the mountains but I would absolutely not break or go mad, and for the world and for people, yet not for praise, I would research day and night. For people in trouble and for people un-blessed I would use my strengths unheralded. I would not accept the cheap stereotype that *just because I am an academic I am alright*

being insane, and I would feel empathy for others and would be a person who thinks of others, first.

”….. wow, no….. what am I thinking.”

To begin with, once you go into rebirth, you signal the end of humanity. I must be extremely tired. I slid down to the floor, as if rubbing my back against the wall. A tremendously heavy, falling feeling. I was imprisoned in the sense that I had completely sank down and yet was still falling. I cradled my head into my hands and sighed.

“Have I broken…..”

What passed through my mind was what Kunagisa said. That when I truly thought that I was no longer capable, then I could call Nao-san. Or perhaps the red contractor Mankind’s Strongest. In the case that I were to rely on her. I would cease having to experience such a struggle. I could borrow a phone from Neo-san….. or perhaps I could use the network to reach out which, despite the slight need for effort, should not be too difficult. The contradictory situation in that despite being able to use such a backdoor I cannot. Am I truly generous enough to approve of such a contradiction… am I truly just a person enough?

Have I not done enough?

”….. of course I have not.”

There is never a point to effort unless it is given to the end.

Not that this was something that could be called effort.

“How, ugly…..”

There is a difference between value and rarity. Having come dangerously close to blaming the world on my own powerlessness – no, having come close to revealing that I had already been blaming the world, I mumbled without hiding the hatefulness toward myself for trying to escape from something that way, and stood up.

As I thought that I had wasted time for no reason, I looked at the opposite wall.

You just watch,『DEAD BLUE』!!

”*Shut up and watch*….. could it be that this is the one with the message?”

There remained the possibility that the suspect was providing a clue on his own accord. I ignored various theories and tried changing the order of the twenty-five letters on the wall, tried dissecting each letter and recreating letters, tried writing it over in a different language, and tried

other such things, but in the end, none of them resulted in anything conclusive. I even forcibly created a language for it, but it felt like I was just trying to will something to happen. These words may have to just be taken literally.

While I did that, the time remaining ticked down to two hours.

"Really, what shall I do, Kunagisa-kun."

As I did a long time ago, as I did before I realized that she were a girl, I called out to Kunagisa. Of course, the Kunagisa Tomo of six years no longer existed, and even the present Kunagisa Tomo existed in the basement of the fourth ward. Thus, there was obviously no answer.

But there was something else instead of an answer. Suddenly, from somewhere – the hallway – an ear-piercing siren noise began echoing everywhere. No, this was not something as normal as a noise. This was like a shockwave. It applied air pressure sufficient to blast apart my ear drums. It was so unpleasant that if one had the talent of purity of tone they still would not be able to identify the note, and it slammed through the door.

"What! What did I do! Really!"

I shouted at the top of my lungs as I went through the door. There was no particular reason to be so loud, but the alarm had such volume that without shouting like this it would not even count as speaking to myself. When I entered the hallway the noise became even louder. I felt like my head was being hammered with cymbals.

"———-!"

I could no longer hear my own voice, even when shouting. Such a small tremor was nothing in the face of the large tidal wave of sound. There must be a speaker somewhere, I thought, as I covered both of my ears, and frantically chased the ceiling with my eyes. Unless I can find and destroy the speaker, my brain would go nuts.

However, before I could even do just that, the next moment, the noise suddenly stopped. I slowly let go of my ears. No, I reminded myself I could not let up my guard yet. There exists the term 'eye of the hurricane.' It would be a folly to think that it was over after going silent once. There could still be a second wave. No, wait, this is indoors. There should not be a hurricane. No, I am confused. I do not understand. Am I stupid?

"Are you feeling consummate?" the door to the stairs opened and Kouta-san arrived from a lower floor. "Hello, long time no see."

“No, long time no see, it has not yet been fifteen minutes.”

“Has it not? Well that is consummate.”

Kouta-san beamed as she pulled the brim of her hat back down. As if she were trying to escape my gaze. Yes. Her behavior was clearly and obviously suspicious.

“Kouta-san..... what did you do?”

“I acquired such a thing,” she said as she pulled an four MO discs [2)] from her pocket – I think – and fanned them out. “They are not directly related to my objective, however, Utsurigi Gaisuke’s research data is still quite a find.”

“And you found the alarm system, too.....” I could tell my speech was still a bit slurred. “I know I am not one to talk, but..... Kouta-san, do you think before you act?”

“How rude, of course I do. I am thinking even as we stand here now.”

That was synonymous with not thinking.

“We are best partners.....” I mumbled a joke that was not a joke. “What shall we do? That sound probably reached the Professor in the first ward. This building is very heavily secured so the sound probably did not reach him, but it must have reached him through the security system.”

“It would be thankful if he thought it were just a false alarm, but life does not go as smoothly,” Kouta-san seemed to say indifferently, as if it were somebody else’s business, yet it was so clearly hers this time. “How bothersome.”

Indeed, it is bothersome.

While I may pull Kouta-san back, it was unexpected that Kouta-san would pull me back instead. This indeed was truly and without a doubt nonsense.

”..... let us run to the rooftop. We may not be found there.”

“Indeed. At the very least, it does sound better than being in the building,” Kouta-san quickly answered, and then we climbed the stairs, climbed the ladder, opened the steel lid, and went out onto the rooftop. Kouta-san stretched her back once, and then walked to toward the west and crawled to the edge. I did not know what she intended, but I followed suit anyways. From the cedar trees – or was it oak? I do not really know – but in any case we could see two silhouettes walking in a jog (given the contradictory overlap of my expression you can tell how discombobulated I

still am). I see, we were prone so that they could not see us even if we could see them. I had begun to think Kouta-san was trying to emulate Samuel Beckett[3]. Not that I actually thought that.

"—..... umm," I squinted my eyes and looked at the two silhouettes. "..... Shito-kun....., ... Misachi-san..... I think?"

"It seems so," Kouta-san remained in the crawling position as she backed up, and then once she reached a point where she would not be seen from the ground, she slapped the ground with both hands and stood up. "They received orders from the Professor to take a look... would be how it seems."

They turned the corner, and so I could no longer see the two. That corner led to the entrance of the seventh ward, to that steel door. I confirmed that, and then backed up the same way Kouta-san did. However, come to think of it, because we could no longer see them anyways, there was no purpose to this action.

"It is not consummate, but it is still slightly fortunate," Kouta-san said. "I worried about a full squad of tough guards coming in..... but two **youngsters** are no trouble at all. It seems the Professor decided it was a false alarm."

"That would be great if true..... however, we still must not be seen."

"Then come this way," Kouta-san pulled my hand and dragged me along. I wondered where she was leading us, but it was to the shade of the water supply tank. She lead me to a small, open space that existed after stepping over several water pipes. "We will not be seen here."

"Well, perhaps we would not be seen with a simple glance..... but."

I could not call it a particularly large space. No matter how you look at it, there was only enough space for one human being. I thought it impossible that the tall Kouta-san and my not especially small adult male self could hide in that space together.

"That is not at all the case."

Kouta-san laughed mischievously – at that, I was able to imagine what was going to happen – and she pulled me to her and then shoved me in, and then, from a third-party perspective it might look like she were hugging me, or rather that was all it could look like, as she pressed herself against me while facing me, wrapped her long arms around my back, and then placed her chin over my right shoulder. Naturally, I could feel her

breathing, hear her heartbeat, and feel her warmth. Of course, my breathing, my heartbeat, my warmth also could be heard and felt by her.

"Now this space is sufficient for the both of us."

"– this can end up problematic, you know." My arms were locked in place by Kouta-san and so I could not resist. No, that was not the problem. "A very big problem."

"Do you dislike problems?"

"I generally also hate solutions....."

"You're quite naive," Kouta-san giggled. It was a very lewd way of laughing. "By the way, if we may resume conversing, while I was looking for that MO disc I tried looking for something like a rope."

"Was there anything?" I restrained my heartbeat as I asked. Although, hearts are automatic muscles, so they are not something that can be suppressed. "Rope....."

"There was not. There were threads, like computer cables, but even if we were to tie them together it would be impossible to reach the sixth ward..... and of course if even cables were gone things would be obvious."

"Is that so....."

To begin with, it may have been stranger to hope that a research facility like this would keep rope strong enough to hold the weight of a person around. If there is no rope, then something like a rope..... or so I tried to think, but the scent of Kouta-san's long hair kept obstructing my train of thought. Or perhaps my thoughts were the ones derailing my thinking. Calm down. Calm down. Think of something else.

"..... hair..... Kouta-san, how about hair?"

"Yes? What about hair?" Kouta-san asked as she hugged me even tighter. Because she was taller than me, being like this made me feel like I was being treated like a child. Suzunashi-san treats me like a child too but, how should I put it, Kouta-san seemed to be taking the exact opposite approach for treating me like a child. "Do you mean my hair?"

"No, I am not..... but would hair be a substitute for rope?"

I had heard that hair is rather firm. Of course, each strand is a mere thread, but some thousand, some tens of thousand strands would turn them into a strong rope. There are cases in history of people having been strangled by hair, so if you were to ask whether it were possible or impossible–

“Ahh, you mean Koutari-san, dear friend,” Kouta-san spoke as if she were whispering into my ear. It gave me goosebumps. “Indeed, for him to have become bald just from a sentence from you is unnatural–”

Exactly. No matter what you may think, my words are not that enticing. Then in that case, there must have been a different reason to cut that long hair – to shave that long hair. I thought a little about that expressionless, apathetic researcher.

“For example – if Koutari-san were to infiltrate the seventh ward using the route we just took. And then he murdered Utsurigi. He crucified Utsurigi to the wall, and then when he was leaving, realized it would be impossible to jump down. Plus, it was raining, so it was even more impossible. However, he must not remain here. Then he would need something like a rope–”

“And so he used his own hair?” Kouta-san asked. “Somewhat consummate, but there is a problem.”

“What do you mean by a problem?” Would that be a bigger problem than your right hand that is rubbing my thighs? “What do you mean, Kouta-san?”

“First, every single one of the rooftops in this facility lacks a fence or railing. In other words, even if you were to throw a rope, there would be nothing to tie it to. You would need some sort of hook to latch onto the edges. Second, there is still too much distance.”

“Distance – do you mean about five meters? Since we are using rope, you would not have to worry about angle.”

“Even if Koutari-san’s hair were a meter long, you know. While I would agree having seen him from a distance that he had a good amount of hair, even if you were to use it all, if you were to even fold it five times over, you would still not create rope strong enough to hold a person. Even if you were to weave the most efficient of rope, four meters would be the best you could do.”

Five times over – four meters. Right, in order to use the hair you would need to twist it to strengthen it, and you would need to deal with knotting it, too. Indeed, in that case it would hardly reach five meters. As Kouta-san said, four meters would be the upper limit. But that would not be enough, and even if you were to make one or two ridiculous assumptions – like if his hair were to suddenly grow – and the hair were able to reach across the

chasm, the first problem still existed, in that there were no hook, and that he would not be able to latch the hair onto the sixth ward. I felt like I had finally come to a psychological solution – and while having my chastity threatened like this, too! – but it seemed Koutari-san had indeed simply cut his hair. What a misleading thing to do! If this were a mystery novel, I would say it were being unfair.

"Is it really not possible to jump that..... sort of distance."

"It would be possible for someone world class. However it is unthinkable for an ordinary human being."

"Human being," I latched onto that phrase. "..... then, would it be possible for something not human?"

"Huh?" Kouta-san answered with an astonished tone. "What do you mean? Are you trying to say that the suspect is a monster or something? Huh..... I don't care, but you know, I wonder what the others would think? You might want to care for who you try to persuade with that."

"There is no need to jump to monsters. This world is not comprised only of human beings and monsters. There are animals..... like dogs," I continued without stopping my line of thought. Otherwise I was only going to lose more concentration. "Would you say it is possible for a large dog to jump seven meters?"

"Are you referring to the three dogs that Kasugai-san kee... no, owns?"

"Well, yes. An animal murder theory," I nodded. By nodding, my jaw dug itself deeper into Kouta-san's body. Augh. "..... even otherwise, someone mentioned that there are boars in this mountain..... and while it may be impossible for boars to make the jump, then perhaps a bird....."

"Are you serious? I admire your capability of saying one silly theory after another," Kouta-san did not sound as if she were admiring at all. "So, how does a dog kill Utsurigi-san? Are you saying the dog used a knife to slice Utsurigi-san up? It is a bizarre and incredulous theory, and you do not feel it any odd?"

"Depending on training..... no, it is impossible," it did not seem an argument I could win either way, so I decided to retreat. "..... shit. So the suspect remains undecided....."

"Undecided? Don't you mean uncertain?"

"We shall have to call someone the suspect in the end anyways, so undecided is fine..... anyways, is it alright now? Shito-kun and Misachi-san

probably went back already."

I squirmed and tried to escape from Kouta-san, but Kouta-san would not let me go, replying, "It is too early to feel safe." She says it is too early, but it has already been ten, fifteen minutes since Shito-kun came into the seventh ward – which also meant that I was being embraced by Kouta-san for ten, fifteen minutes – so I felt that enough time had passed for them to consider this a false alarm.

"Kouta-sa–" "Shh."

My complaint was forcibly suppressed by Kouta-san. Or more specifically, the back of my head was grabbed and my face was pushed into Kouta-san's shoulder, and so I was forced into silence. I wondered what was going on and turned my head, and noticed that the lid to the rooftop on the other side of the water tanks was slowly turning. Of course, that inorganic steel lid with no machinations would never begin moving on its own–

"Shit! What is this lid! It's fucking heavy! Damnit! What am I, a dumbell-lifting Olympian?"

Shito-kun's voice. Shito-kun's voice could be heard from the other side of the entrance. It seemed he was having trouble pushing up the lid.

"– I am surprised that they would even check the rooftop," I sighed with despair. "Wary, I suppose I should say..... well I guess it cannot be helped given the circumstances....."

"Or rather, a huge clump of MO discs are missing, so this was expected."

Said the thief. That is right. The alarm began sounding because Kouta-san had taken the MO discs in the first place. Then Shito-kun and Misachi-san would start by looking in that room. And once they notice the discs were missing, then they would never think this a false alarm. They would obviously investigate every nook and cranny.

"You should have just put them back....."

"You cannot call yourself a first-class thief if you return what you have once stolen. Come, get a little closer. We'll be found."

She tightened her hold on me and pushed me deeper. Of course, there was nothing *deeper* for me to be pushed into, so the result was simply that she pressed herself even closer against me. If we were to be found like this, I would not really have an excuse to say. As a result, I wrapped my arms

around her. If I may be found while eating the poison, I might as well eat the whole dish. I shall even eat the table and the chair while I am at it.

"My, my. How lewd of you, dear friend," Kouta-san smiled happily. "I, do not, dislike this."

"I hate it..... now please, be quiet....."

Shito-kun had finally figured it out, as he successfully lifted the lid. And then he slowly pulled his small form onto the rooftop.

"Ahh, shit, what a pain..... why am I stuck doing this crap, when we're so stupid busy..... it's absurd..... there's no way there's an intruder..... I mean, how do you get in here anyways..... there's a limit to how paranoid you can be, Misachi-san....."

Shito-kun whispered to himself. It seemed he was the type that talked to himself a lot. I felt a strange sense of intimacy with him. Including the part that most of what he said were complaints.

Shito-kun shut the lid, and then glanced around.

"There's no one....." he whispered. "Right, check. Left, check..... god, so stupid....."

It seemed he had no intention of checking carefully. Indeed in that sense, this position may have been the best of hiding places. The problem just lay with the way we were hiding. Oh no. I felt like I was the one reaching my limit. Ahh. I feel hot.

"The Kunagisa Syndicate isn't picking up any calls either..... really....." his mumbling continued, and he placed a hand back on the lid. "What's gonna happen..... I mean, that's pretty messed up of the Professor to want to turn that cute-ish girl into a specimen..... what's he trying to do, **make another one like me**? – I mean, even placing a hand on someone from the Kunagisa Syndicate."

Kunagisa Syndicate..... the reason that I was slowly losing immediately recovered upon hearing that. It seemed Professor Kyouichirou was gradually..... well, not really, but it seemed he was progressing things, as Suzunashi-san and Neo-san, and Miyoshi-sensei predicted. However, what caught my attention was not that fact, but rather the speech mannerism of Shito-kun, who did not seem to agree with the methods. Shito-kun was supposed to be an absolute backer of Professor Kyouichirou, so what was going on here?

And then I remembered Neo-san's words. *Oogaki-kun and Uze-san have a reason for their adulation of the Professor. Respect toward the Professor, repaying of favors from the Professor, and so on. However, that's why all you have to do is provide them with more.* That was probably, in other words, a simple matter of arithmetic. Add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Shito-kun may currently be wavering. If that were the case. If that were the case–

Then, Shito-kun paused as he was about to open the lid. He did not just pause, he was staring in our direction. With displeasure, as if he were suspecting something, he stared the water tank, behind which Kouta-san and I hid. Did he notice? No, there was no way he could notice. After all, Shito-kun tried returning once. There was no way he could see. There was no way he could see, but–

"Hey. Someone there?" finally, Shito-kun spoke. "Someone there behind that tank?"

I almost blurted something out, but that was muffled by Kouta-san.

"If someone's there, come out," Shito-kun withdrew his hand from the lid and stood up. "It's obvious, you know, that someone's there. Huh? If you're not gonna come to me, I'm gonna come to you."

"– there is no helping it, then," Kouta-san said, and let go of me with a disappointed expression. "Stay here."

"What? But, Kou-"

"I'm coming now!"

Kouta-san shouted loudly toward Shito-kun. And then she whispered to me.

"Until everything is over, absolutely do not come out," she said, and then she pushed me down again, walked around the tank, and showed herself to Shito-kun.

There was no time for me to stop her.

And in any case, I could not think of a reason to stop her. There were no words that could be said to stop her anyways, because despite having fallen into such a troublesome situation, despite having fallen into this, she showed a *this is absolutely nothing* expression.

"– huh? What?" Shito-kun had an annoyed voice. "Ahh, ahh? ..... what? You. I don't know you."

"Shall I introduce myself?" Kouta-san smiled to Shito-kun. "The name is Ishimaru Kouta. Of course, you all may recognize me better as one

Zerozaki Itoshiki."

"..... the intruder from three days ago," Shito-kun answered. "..... what. You, that voice, a girl? You're huge..... not as big as that big sis though."

"Are you interested in girls, **young sir**?" Kouta-san stepped toward Shito-kun without a care. "That is quite and rather consummate."

"Don't move! You won't get away with this!"

"With what?" Kouta-san said, feigning ignorance. "We cannot converse without getting closer, can we not? You called out for me because you wanted to talk, did you not?"

"Shit, I said don't move!"

Shito-kun backed up as he shouted. There was no reason for him to back up, but he was probably feeling cowed. I remembered my meeting with her for the first time last night, how she had an eerie, mysterious quality to her. It was overwhelming, terribly overwhelming. You would obviously feel cowed by trying to take on such a person straight-up. As such, Shito-kun was currently trying to escape from Kouta-san somehow. It was probably not so much subconscious so much as primal instinct.

"Fufu–," Kouta-san stopped moving. At the entrance to the ward. "If you do not have anything to talk about, then I shall take my leave–"

"! No you won't!"

Shito-kun pounced at Kouta-san. Obligation won out over fear. However, while that may have been the right thing to do, I could not call it the wise thing to do. Because it was obvious that the *intruder* Ishimaru Kouta that showed herself to him had no intention of escaping. It was obvious that Kouta-san's words and actions were all just a means of inviting him to combat.

It was obvious that Shito-kun stood no chance of accepting that fight.

Kouta-san turned backwards to evade Shito-kun's fist. And then she continued turning, sinking her long leg into Shito-kun's abdomen. That spin move was closer to Tae Kwon Do than Karate. Among numerous martial arts styles, only Tae Kwan Do accepted turning your entire back to the opponent at any time.

Shito-kun bend over, but Kouta-san did not let up. With her other leg – it was another Tae Kwan Do move – this time she stomped her heel into Shito-kun's heart. This forced his body to stand back up, and then he bent

over backwards. And then Kouta-san spun once more, and using that torque, struck a palm into the right lung – this was a Judo move.

"Gua... gah!"

Shito-kun was not even able to scream, as he emitted just some grunts. By the point you could hear those grunts, you could tell who had won the fight. However, even so. Even so, Kouta-san did not let up. She elbowed his abdomen, back-handed his heart, kneed his kidney, and finally did a roundhouse kick to slam him to the ground.

It took an instant – no, it was even faster than that, given that Shito-kun was only able to utter that much. It seemed he had been knocked unconscious. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Kouta-san pummeled Shito-kun until he lost consciousness. I could not think of another reason for such precise blows to internal organs. Of course, that was all done to escape from here, but I still could not shake away the feeling that she had gone too far.

"Kouta-san–"

I was about to step out from behind the water tank, but,

"FREEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeZE!"

That violent, explosion of noise nailed me back in place. I looked and saw Uze Misachi-san pointing a handgun at Kouta-san. Kouta-san was crouched down next to the felled Shito-kun, and when Misachi-san suddenly appeared, she looked mildly surprised and said, "My."

"There was another of you – I had completely forgotten."

"– please do not move – I will shoot."

The handgun Misachi-san held in both hands, ... I think it was a Jericho 941. An Israeli clone of the CZ-75. An handgun that could switch between 9mm Luger and 41AE bullets. Also, I think the company used the same design for the more famous Desert Eagle. My memory may not be correct, so I could not say for certain, but in any case, the problem here was not the type of handgun.

Considering the importance of the secrets here, it is not strange for handguns to be equipped as a security measure – however, this was still out of the ordinary. It was too much. For Kouta-san, even though she took out Shito-kun in a flash–

"– hahah. Ahahahahahah!"

However. Kouta-san simply burst out laughing at that Misachi-san. And then she seemed not to mind the handgun at all, and simply stood up. As if she were making a mockery of it.

"Ahahah– hahahahahah."

"What is it!? Why're you laughing! I said don't move!"

"I'm laughing because you said not to move, young lady," Kouta-san raised her chin, looking down at Misachi-san, who stood three-quarters her height. "In this situation. In this situation, with your friend pummeled into the ground, to say that you won't shoot if they don't move. And then to not shoot even when they move. How lukewarm. It's one thing to be cold, and it's another thing to be hot, but you all are truly lukewarm. Even if you are mere side-characters who only appear to lose, if this is all you have to try to overrun me, then it's indeed quite a good joke–"

"Quiet! Shut up!"

Misachi-san raised her gun to the air, and fired a bullet. A threat, and proof that there were real bullets inside. And by that harsh sound I could tell there were not the 9mm Lugers but rather the 41AEs. In other words, at most there were ten shots left in the magazine. There were five less shots than if it were using 9mm Lugers, but that is still simply a comparison, as nine shots are still plenty to kill a person – or even two people.

"If you take me lightly again, I'll really shoot! Intruder! Get away from Shito-kun!"

"You say to not move, and then before the inside of your mouth dries, you say to move away from your friend. What do you really want me to, young lady," Kouta-san smirked – and she continued mocking her opponent. "It is not consummate in the least. A young lady like you working as a secretary, and this simplistic fool of a boy working as an assistant, so this must mean Professor Shadou Kyouichirou is not nearly as the rumors say. If this is all, then I might as well have just gone in from the front instead of **taking such a roundabout path**."

"Young lady? Don't you get the situation you're in!? Do you think I won't shoot–"

"You think that everyone will oblige you just by holding a handgun. You think that everyone will submit just by showing power. That is why you're a young lady," Kouta-san said as she kept close distance with Misachi-san – or rather, as she kept close distance with the handgun. "If you think you

can kill a person with that toy, you are greatly mistaken. Are you one of those that believe that you can beat a battleship with a single spear?"

"Shut up – do you think I'd miss at this distance?" Misachi-san tightened her stance with the handgun. "If you remain quiet, we won't deal badly with you–"

"And be used in one of the Professor's **human experiments**? – like this simplistic fool lying down over here."

"Shut up!" Misachi-san exploded at those words. "– what's your goal? Why'd you come in here? What lab sent you here!"

"– let us suppose," Kouta-san lowered the tone of her voice a bit. "That the speed of the first bullet fired is roughly seven-hundred kilometers per hour. In that case, how much time does it take to travel the distance between you and I, roughly two meters?"

".....? What're you talking about?"

"A supposition. The answer, young lady?"

"..... 0.08 seconds," Misachi-san answered suspiciously. "..... so what? That just means that a human being can't dodge a bullet."

"It is difficult, if you just hear that number. However–" Kouta-san pointed at Misachi-san. No, she pointed to Misachi-san's handgun. "– Jericho 941. The trigger is 7.7 centimeters, so it's a double-action barrel. Am I right?"

".....? .....? So! What's the point?"

"That you immediately throw a tantrum is why you're a young lady. There're no differences between you and the child monkeys you can find in the red-light districts. A double-action barrel means that you require 5 kilograms of force for the trigger. A single-action would require half that, of course. It would take at least 0.5 seconds for a lady like you to pull that trigger. And that's on the shorter end."

"—-? .....!"

"That is not all. Furthermore, it requires 0.02 seconds for the hammer to fall. By this point it will have taken 0.6 seconds. Now, this is a simple calculation of how long it takes for the bullet to reach me from where it's fired, but we must add the time taken to make sure the bullet hits. In other words, the time it takes for you to line up the shot. My brain, my heart, well really it doesn't matter, but the time taken to make sure that 41 Action Express lands would be 0.1 seconds for a professional, so for a beginner like

you it might be at least 0.4 seconds? In total, it would take a second. A full second. This is like eternity. At the very least, it is more than enough time to traverse a mere two meters."

"Shut up! Even if I miss once, I still have a second and third–"

"There is no point to an attack that takes a full second in between, young lady. It would be much faster to just hit me with your hands. Since we are given such a golden opportunity for learning, I shall remind you of one more thing, young lady. Handguns are a weapon to be used at range. At the very worse you want five meters, preferably at least ten meters between you and your target. That would mean no matter how fast I move, all you need to do is line up the shot, so even if you fire five times at least one of them should hit. It would be consummate to say that unless you are catching them unaware, a handgun is a weapon that can only be used at range. Newbies are deceived by its looks. Even if the weapon allows for one-shot victories, unless that one shot lands, there is no meaning nor value–"

"Sh- shut up!"

Misachi-san pulled the trigger. This time, for sure, toward Kouta-san.

An explosion sounded – and that was all. Just like she had done toward Shito-kun, Kouta-san twisted herself to avoid the path of the bullet, and in the same motion closed on Misachi-san, and slammed a palm up into her jaw. Misachi-san's body was lifted into the air. And then Kouta-san slammed an elbow with her entire body's force into Misachi-san's body, which had temporarily been freed from gravity.

I do not know how to express that single motion. It was completely different from how she fought against Shito-kun. Indeed, it was like a terribly efficient and beautiful wave.

Misachi-san's body tumbled along the rooftop, as if sliding – it reminded me of a curling stone – and stopped right at the edge. She did not get up nor even utter a sound. Kouta-san walked next to Misachi-san, confirmed that she had lost consciousness, and then plucked the gun out of her hand.

"– you can come out now, dear friend."

"....." I revealed myself from behind the water tank. "..... thank you."

“Hmmhmm,” Kouta-san playfully pointed the barrel of the Jericho toward me. “Bang! Ahahah!”

”.....”

“My. You seem unhappy.”

“Well, no..... I just thought, maybe you went too far.....” I looked at the crumpled two. “And I think you put yourself in too much danger. To taunt someone with a handgun.....”

“If I didn’t taunt her, I would have been shot.”

“Perhaps. ..... then does that mean what you said was a lie?”

“I would prefer if you called it a means.”

Kouta-san smiled and laughed, and then threw the Jericho to me. I caught it while thinking she was being quite careless without even setting the safety. It was heavy. Well of course. A Jericho weighs over a kilogram. Even a male like myself would struggle to hold this gun out straight. And – and, of course, Misachi-san.

In other words, that was all. What Kouta-san kept spouting was just a way to buy time. In truth, Misachi-san’s arms had just been worn out. To the point where she could no longer aim properly. To the point where it would even slow her muscles’ ability to react to the order to fire.

“Newbies are more likely to being duped by specific numbers and logic – I suppose.”

You’ll get burned if you get tricked by numbers for anything – I think Kunagisa said that.

“That is all. I do not know the bullet velocity of a Jericho,” Kouta-san nodded. “I leave that in your hands. You know how to use it, do you not? I can use it too, but I am not fond of them. Because I feel that is makes things unfair.”

“Huh..... unfair.....” I turned on the safety mechanism and slid the Jericho into the belt of my trousers. It made me feel off-kilter, but there was no real other way to carry this. “However, what shall we do next? Now they know you are intruding.”

“That is on its own consummate. Now..... because *there was an intruder after all*, the level of suspicion toward Kunagisa-san is alleviated, is it not?”

“Well, that is good for us, but for Kouta-san.....”

“This is not enough to trouble me. There is not one reason for me to be troubled. And.....” Kouta-san moved to where Shito-kun lay. “Now we have

a means of escaping, too.”

[1)] insane logic
[2)] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magneto-optical_drive
[3)] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Beckett

二日目（5）——首輪物語

Day 2 (5)

Collar Tale

0

It is easy to trick a genius.
It is difficult to trick an idiot.
It is impossible to trick a pig.

1

When there was less than an hour left, I returned once more to Neo-san's private room. Neo-san and Kouta-san went to a separate room to discuss what they were going to do next – that next presumably being something an *afterwards* completely unrelated to Kunagisa and I – and so I was left alone in this room. I simply sat in a sofa surrounded by various paintings, mumbling alone to myself.

The sound of the clock ticking away the seconds was loud. I felt like I should have prepared for this and brought a digital watch. But Kunagisa had customized that so much that it had become a completely messed-up clock, and this analog watch was a gift from Hime-chan, so wearing it felt like an obligation, so I did not have a choice after all.

"A choice – but it may be a relative blessing to even have one choice."

Choose.

The action of choosing.

I pulled out Misachi-san's Jericho from my belt and stared at it. It had a very boorish form. However, handling it – as long as I did not let myself lose my calm as Misachi-san had done earlier – was not too difficult.

Practicing even without reaching the levels of being called training would be enough to give me good aim.

"This country is really peaceful....."

The *means of escaping* that Kouta-mentioned was quite simple. First, she pulled the unconscious Misachi-san and Shito-kun inside the ward, and tied up Misachi-san with a PC cable. She said Misachi-san probably would not awaken for half a day anyways, but it was just for insurance. As for Shito-kun, Kouta-san tossed him to me (literally, tossed him), and made me carry him on my back.

"I support the feminist movement. That men and women should be equal."

"Then it is right for you to carry him, dear friend," Kouta-san smiled. "As men and women are equal, it is clear who between you and I has authority."

Indeed.

It was, of course, not like Kouta-san had handed Shito-kun to me out of kindness. In short, Oogaki Shito-kun's role was to be a *key*. His unconscious eye was for the retina scanner. We then used the card he carried around, and I had heard the ID number enough times to have remembered it. I was a bit unsure of whether it was ikwe9f2ma444 or ikwe9mada423 but Kouta-san hurried me and I was able to remember. It was the same for the memorized number. I was a lot more worried about this one (I felt like it would be really handy to have Kunagisa in these cases) but it seemed I was correct. However, both the number and the ID were just bonuses for the security system. The important things were the card, the retina check – and the voice. In other words, the real proofs of identity. Of these, we were able to clear the card and the retina check, but there was no chance of forcing the unconscious Shito-kun to speak–

"Oogaki Shito. My ID is ikwe9f2ma444."

Kouta-san said, **changing her voice**.

"Voice and retina confirmed. Please wait."

The synthetic voice responded, and the door opened.

"Why are you surprised? Aikawa Jun does not need to have monopoly over vocal mimicry, does she?" Kouta-san stated. "Even I can trick a machine. **These** are consummately simple constructs."

"You know Aikawa-san?"

Kouta-san made a slightly displeased expression at my question, but she quickly recovered, and said, "I have heard about her through the grapevine."

"I had a feeling you meant that notorious Aikawa Jun when you mentioned a contractor – of course, if it were her, she would deceive not just machines but even God. Well, we must hurry along or the door will shut. Ahh, leave Shito-kun there, will you? We've tied up his hands and his feet, so he can do nothing."

In other words, this time it was Shito-kun and Misachi-san who were captured. While we would be found out eventually, it was best delayed as much as possible. Even if the Professor would eventually realize the two were missing and act, we would still be given a bit of reprieve until the time limit. Well, perhaps that is too much to hope for, but in any case, that was how Kouta-san and I succeeded in escaping the seventh ward.

"……."

– so now, a question.

Ishimaru Kouta, who meticulously infiltrated this facility, and even succeeded in remaining inside by feigning that she had already gone *outside*. The Machiavellist, the schemer, the sly, the resourceful, the veteran Ishimaru Kouta. Do you really think that Ishimaru Kouta would be distracted by an MO disc (regardless of how important the data on it might have been) and accidentally set off the alarm? If I were to go further, Misachi-san aside, what if she (bearing in mind how easily she defeated) bothered engaging in a long conversation with the untrained Shito-kun simply to learn his voice–

How terrifying. What was more terrifying than anything else was not her action (– after all, Aikawa-san would do something like that too, and even Kunagisa would have been able to calculate that much of an escape route–) but rather her audacity to do all of that with such nonchalance. It would be neither praise nor critique to say that her plan had not at all a high probability of success. If Misachi-san had opted for escape, then that would have been the end of it, and there was no guarantee that only a small number of people would come. There were plenty of other issues hidden away. Of course, most importantly, that she was relying on my (my!) memory was the biggest problem of all. If I were to have come up with this plan myself it would have been without a doubt foolishness. This sort of

heroic absurdity is in most cases *in retrospect the smartest way of accomplishing something through the only method possible*, but I still would not think that to be the case. I risked my life – no, I **abandoned** my life to jump from the sixth ward to the seventh ward, but I would not be surprised if someone were to ask if this was not on par with that decision.

"....."

However, Kouta-san's scheme succeeded beautifully, and so here we are.

After our escape, Kouta-san contacted Neo-san with her wireless, and Neo-san stepped outside as if to see off the visiting (or more accurately, he had called for her) Kasugai-san, and let us in on the way back in.

In the end, Kouta-san was certain we would succeed, and I was not. Even before determining whether that risk was worth taking or not, I was unable to come up with such an audacious idea.

"– I suppose that is the difference between a completed work and a perfect work....."

And the difference in those who can see things and those who cannot. Perhaps that was all that was behind this Utsurigi Gaisuke crucifixion incident. That the suspect was seeing something that an ordinary person like myself could not, and that the dismembering of the corpse and the destruction of the corpse, and the taking of the arms, and the elegant blood message, all of it all, may have been for some purpose.

"..... one hour twenty-five minutes remaining....."

Or if I were to say *Dead Blue*-style, one hour twenty-four minutes forty-six point seventy-seven seconds. However, after thinking for two-and-a-half hours and not coming up with any leads, was it realistic to hope for something to come up in the last hour and a half? Thinking negatively was not going to progress matters any, either, but I could not help my mind tumbling in that direction.

"Shiogi-chan – if you were in my position, even in this worst of positions in the worst of situations, would you be able to come up with the most effective clever scheme that could exist?"

Well, of course you would.

However, it is impossible for me.

It seems I am incapable of becoming a strategist even remotely the class of Shiogi-chan.

For example, how about if I were to force something together. Let me think hard enough that I would be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with even Professor Kyouichirou. Yes, for example – right now, Ishimaru Kouta-san, who is helping me out with my thinking. What would happen if we were to **suppose her as the suspect**?

One cannot say it impossible. After all, Professor Kyouichirou does not know of her existence, and within this facility the only one who knows about her is the corrupt Neo-san (although currently Shito-kun and Misachi-san would also be in the know). And unlike the researchers, Kouta-san was not restricted to any research ward. As a result, there are less obstacles for her being suspected than any other suspect. And that thinking speed, that wisdom, and that decision-making that she had just shown me, would make murdering Utsurigi and coming up with such an unsolvable crime a piece of cake–

"..... such hideous nonsense."

I forced shut the forced theory. There was only so far I could handle the lack of logic. I did not intend to respect Professor Kyouichirou any, but the Professor's forced theory about Kunagisa Tomo being the suspect was much more believable. Truly, this world had no lack of mysterious respect.

"In that case, Neo-san would, under the same reason..... well, there is one more bizarre theory....."

That would simply be the possibility that **I myself** am the suspect. Would it not be a rather tasteful twist if I, a mere accomplice to Kunagisa Tomo's visit, were the suspect behind the killing of Utsurigi Gaisuke? Of course, that would simply be tasteful, and meaningless. I know that I am not the suspect, and while I harbored hostility toward Utsurigi, I did not harbor any intent to murder.

However.

In this case, **whether an action took place** did not matter. All that mattered was that **it was acceptable**. As long as some level of logic could be followed–

"I am thinking such foolish things."

I mumbled, and then I found a phone in the room. I own a cell phone, but I had left it in the wooden apartment I called my home. Because, leaving the satellite cell phone that Kunagisa used (which Professor Kyouichirou confiscated) aside, there was no way I could get signal here so deep in the

mountains. However, phone companies are bound by law, such that no matter where you are in Japan (including a lonely island in the middle of the ocean or in an unexplored region of a mountain range) if there is a request, they are obligated to connect the phone line. As a result, even this Shadow Kyouichirou Research Facility was connected to the outside via a network, and that was why Neo-san's private room had a phone.

And then it hit me. Usually, phone lines in these sorts of facilities are designed not to have access to outside networks, but this facility was designed to house a ridiculously small number of employees. In other words, that phone probably did connect outside. By the time I had finished my thought, I had already moved to the phone, and picked up the receiver.

As for the number I immediately tried to call, my fingers stopped midway, and I hung up the phone. Come to think of it, it was not reasonable to hope for a proper conversation with that person. That person does not speak when they do not want to speak, and that person does not speak even when they want to speak, and yet while that would be acceptable if they were listening to what I was saying, that person does not listen to any orders from anyone other than their master, and that person does not even pay attention to their master's orders. However, after thinking about it some more, there was no point in assuming that the phone would even be picked up by that person in the first place. Worst case, it might even be that crazy fortune-teller. What would that clairvoyant say about my current situation? I feel like my blood boiled just by imagining what she might say.

"Yet, Miiko-san is out..... and she does not carry a cell phone."

And Miiko-san has instincts as sharp as Onimarukunitsuna [1)], so there was nothing to say that she would not sense Suzunashi-san having been locked up in a cage. Considering the immediate-action personality of Miiko-san, I could not imagine that leading to anything good. After pondering, I ended up deciding to dial Hime-chan's cell phone.

"Hello hello?" answered a somewhat nervous-sounding Hime-chan, before the phone rang even a second time. "Who is this?"

"A man who seeks world domination."

"Ahh, Master. Hullo good day," Hime-chan sounded relieved. "I was surprised by the unknown number, Master. What's up? Weren't you supposed to be in the middle of a trip to Nagoya Prefecture?"

“Yes. Pretty much,” I answered, and tilted my head to the side at her calling Nagoya a prefecture. Pretty sure she is wrong. But for some reason that sounded familiar. “Right now, well, ... I am calling from where we are staying.”

“Mhm. Guess that’s why it’s unknown. Ahh, you know, perfect time. Hime-chan forgot to tell Master something.”

“What?”

“Souvenir. Can you bring back five bars of uirō[2)]?”

“Oh? Did Hime-chan like sweet things?” I asked while I tried to remember if uirō were sweet. Ahh, right. This is the Aichi Prefecture. Nagoya is just a city here. It is not Nagoya Prefecture, after all. ”..... by uirō do you mean that soft thing that looks like yōkan[3)]? Do you like that stuff, Hime-chan?”

“Nope, Hime-chan’s friend does. Do you remember? I introduced you. Usagi-chan or something. Hime-chan forgot that when Hime-chan mentioned Matser was headed to Nagoya Prefecture she started going on about uirō. Hime-chan doesn’t need them, but five bars for my friend. Colorful ones, if you can. Master’s sucked away plenty of money from Hime-chan, so you’ve got enough, right?”

“I would rather you not make me sound like a villain..... yes, you are right, if I can return safely, I will buy you five hundred bars.”

“No way. I’m not Dazai[4)]’s *imogayu*[5)].”

imogayu was Akutagawa.

I corrected her, like a Master.

“Was that so. But Master, whatcha mean by that? *If I can return safely*. You make it sound like you might not.”

“Who knows. They say there’re green mountains wherever you are in the world, so it’s no surprise that you can die anywhere, too.” Indeed, no surprise. Especially when it comes to someone like me. “But if I am not to return, you can do whatever you want with the stuff in my room.”

“Really?” Hime-chan sounded excited. “Then I can take the weird T-shirts and weird jeans and weird jackets and weird socks?”

“Avoid calling other peoples’ stuff weird.....” and what did she want to do with socks anyways? “Yes. In exchange, Hime-chan will also have to take care of paying off the apartment and throwing away the trash and that sort of stuff.”

“Ehhh,” Hime-chan suddenly sounded displeased. How mercenary. “But you know, Master, you sound serious. Are you in a bind? Were you in a building when a terrorist started attacking or did a plane come crashing or did a submarine come hurtling in?”

“No, nothing like that, this time..... but something similar.”

Mmhmm, Hime-chan did not sound appeased.

“Master’s pretty smart but kiiiiinda stupid,” Hime-chan said, not sounding anything like her age. “Hime-chan’s an idiot but not stupid. So Hime-chan knows Master’s fretting right now.”

“Uh huh. Well that is nice. Does that mean you can help?”

“Of course not. I have class soon.”

What a pure-hearted reason.

“Ah, I see..... Hime-chan is at school,” I said as I checked the wristwatch Hime-chan had given me. “You should not be bringing cell phones to school.”

“Yeah yeah. I get it, Master,” and then I heard a chime from far off overlapping with Hime-chan’s voice. “Oops, well, the chime rang, so Hime-chan’s gotta go now, Master.”

“Yes, farewell.”

Keeping with the politeness of being the caller, I placed the receiver back down. And then I felt like some weight had been lifted off my shoulders and sagged a bit. I sighed deeply enough that it felt like I was blowing out all the air in my lungs, and then I returned to the sofa.

That was fine.

That should be fine.

As someone who had never truly trusted the individual known as myself, I truthfully had nothing like confidence. It was not that there was any falsehood behind the words I had said to Kouta-san some hours ago, but my life is a history of failure, and mixed with regret and repentance. That was why. That was why in the event of failure, or perhaps in the event of guilt, when I repent, there should not be anything for me to have left undone.

I had finished wrapping up loose ends.

Now I just need to do what I want.

”..... maybe it would be good to go back to the cage once and talk to Kunagisa.....”

If one were to talk about a remote-control type person, Kunagisa Tomo would fall right in that category. Cooped up in her mansion, unable to even descend stairs by herself. Yet that very Kunagisa Tomo also attained and controlled worldly information and scientific knowledge (even if she were not to the level of Chii-kun). If I were to **input** the data I had gathered in the past two and a half hours, maybe she could come up with some sort of answer.

That said, going back to the fourth ward after Kasugai-san has returned would be quite risky. I do not think Kasugai-san would use the stairs, so it should be somewhat alright, but I could not help but err on the side of caution given that it would be an irreversible risk.

"No point in fretting over it, though....."

Hime-chan is in class, anyways, I mumbled to myself. Someone hearing that would not know what I mean at all, and then I tried to leave the room. I thought about discussing it with Kouta-san. However, before I could even reach for the doorknob, the door opened toward the other side. Huh. Was this door automatic? I had unfortunately never encountered one before, but they do say the world has automatic doors that do not open sideways – no, I do not recall this door being of such make. That would mean that someone was trying to enter the room from the hallway. And as expected, Kouta-san looked at me with wide eyes.

"– my. What is it, dear friend? Why're you standing there?"

"No, I was just thinking of returning to the cages once..... I wanted to ask for Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san's opinions. However, that is a dangerously dangerous act, so I was wondering what to do."

"No, I do not think that a bad idea at all," Kouta-san said. "And, that works out quite well."

"Quite well? Speaking of which, did you finish speaking to Neo-san?"

"I wouldn't call it finish so much as stopped," Kouta-san answered vaguely. "Took a small break. A visitor arrived in the middle. There was a call from Koutari-san to Neo-san just now, that Koutari-san was going to be coming here for some purpose. But it's not like I can let Koutari-san see me. And so it seems they're going to use this room, so I've been told to take you out."

"Uh huh."

..... Koutari-san.

My mind recalled that desperately (I do not know of anything more desperate than that) weaved-together theory about Koutari Hinayoshi being the suspect. Kouta-san had instantly kicked away the idea of using his hair as a rope, but that did not mean all suspicion could be lifted. There was still the possibility that Koutari-san had used a different method to kill Utsurigi. At the very least, it seemed like Koutari-san and Utsurigi were not on friendly terms – although I do not think any human being was on friendly terms with Utsurigi.

"Not one–, ... but you know," a question crept up my mind. "It feels like he would get along just fine with Kokoromi-sensei....."

"Utsurigi-san may have deliberately distanced himself from others," Kouta-san said. "Would it not be best to just ask Kunagisa-san about that? Of course, Kunagisa-san does not seem too keen on speaking much about Utsurigi-san."

"It cannot be helped. She is pretty clumsy. She has loose lips, but she can either say everything, or say nothing, and only one or the other. Fuzzy things like *I can say this much* are incomprehensible to her."

"Like bool. Or perhaps I should say like blue?"

"Both, of course."

I left the room and moved to the side of the hallway near Kouta-san. And then I came up with one not-that-bad idea. Of course, I could not run into Koutari-san here, but at the same time that meant that was the only thing that I could not do. I wanted to hear what Koutari-san had to say, for information gathering purposes. And if I am not to be allowed, then–

"Kouta-san."

"Accepted."

Before I could say anything, Kouta-san pulled out a wireless from her coat. It was smaller than a cell phone and basically shaped like a board. There were four knobs in the place of buttons, and Kouta-san tweaked them. It was what she had used to communicate with Neo-san earlier, but as you might except of the thief Kouta-san, she had her share of secret gadgets.

"Yes – correct, Neo-san. Please, go on like that."

After exchanging two, three lines, Kouta-san received agreement – or rather, acceptance, from Neo-san.

“Then let us wait on the rooftop. Other rooms would do, but if Koutari-san were to open any doors for no reason, everything would end on the spot.”

“Uh huh.....” the rooftop again. “However, how would we hear them from the rooftop?”

“We shall use this wireless for that. If we keep it on a receiving channel they will not hear our voices, after all. Well, the one thing to worry about is that someone somewhere might be intercepting the radio waves..... but that is not a significant worry here.”

Said Kouta-san as she began climbing the stairs to the rooftop.

“If anything, I worry more about the two of them.”

“Shito-kun and Misachi-san?” I asked as I followed her in climbing the stairs. “They will not wake up for half a day, right? You beat them so unnecessarily, after all.”

“My, my. It is not consummate to deliberately speak of one like a sadist. I did not use any more violence than necessary.”

“Leaving Misachi-san aside, I think you went too far with Shito-kun. You kept striking at his internal organs. It would have sufficed to strike his head once. He will be in quite some pain for a while.”

“Keep talking as you wish. You shall find out soon enough how kind I am.”

Kouta-san replied with an inexplicable retort. We finished climbing the stairs, opened the door, and then Kouta-san took off her coat and spread it out on the ground before sitting. I did the same and sat in front of her. Kouta-san began fiddling with the knobs on the wireless.

”..... come to think of it, this place has security systems but no security cameras,” I said out of boredom. “This suits Kouta-san and I just fine, but is that not a security problem?”

“From an administrative standpoint that is more consummate,” Kouta-san answered my question without taking her eyes off the device. “There are probably some things they would rather not be recorded. For example, those MO discs had some value, but were not anything important. Basically, that is how it is.”

“Everything and everything is recorded in their individual brains.....”

To begin with, is that machine-based security really usually enough?

Kouta-san seemed to have finished tweaking the channels, as she placed the wireless device smack dab in the middle between the two of us. I could hear something that sounded like something was brushing against clothing. Perhaps Neo-san had placed a wireless in his pocket, too.

"Hmm. It's a bit off."

Kouta-san tilted her head to the side as she turned a knob just a bit. And then, it seemed the wireless device began picking up what sounded like a person's voice.

"..... like..... so..... utari-San."

"No clue."

"However, it seems you took your time. How rare of you, Koutari-san, considering how precise you are with time."

"For some reason the elevator was broken."

Neo-san and Koutari-san's voices. It did not sound like they were talking as they were walking, so it seemed they were in that private room adorned with paintings.

"..... so, what did you want, Koutari-san?"

"About the research, of course."

And then the two of them began conversing about topics that chained together what seemed like specialized language (something ability and something circuit, and other such things of that lingo). I listened intently for a while, but there is nothing more boring than listening to words that you do not understand. This may sound rude to Neo-san and Koutari-san, but the two of us gradually began losing interest in their conversation.

"..... it seems like this was a complete waste of effort," Kouta-san seemed to feel the way, as she mumbled in a very bored tone. "Although we did not really use much effort. Still, it is amazing that they can continue talking about such a pointless topic. Do they find it amusing?"

"Do you understand bits of it? It sounds like a foreign language to me."

"It is because I understand bits of it that I find it boring," Kouta-san said. "Boring even if you understand, boring if you don't, it's the worst."

"I cannot shake the feeling that this is a waste of time..... I wonder if Neo-san won't change the subject to the incident."

"If he were to shift the subject now, it would be quite unnatural. That person has his own sets of issues. At the very least, he cannot afford to show his cards yet."

“I understand that, but..... then, Kouta-san. Can I leave this place to you?” I stood up. “I shall head back to the cage to check on Kunagisa.”

“Dividing up now. It is not consummate to be pressing such a boring task to me, but at this point, I suppose it cannot be helped. There is the matter of the remaining time, after all.”

I looked at my watch. An hour and fifteen minutes remained.

“Ah..... but, if Kouta-san taking out Shito-kun acts as a camouflage, ... if the Professor were to panic over it, then maybe this number will grow a bit.”

“Or it could do the opposite,” Kouta-san adjusted her cap a bit and looked at me. “The two who went to check on the seventh ward do not show any signs of returning. This is extremely suspicious. Of course, if he were to trust the two, there is a large possibility that the Professor simply thinks, *even if something were to happen, the two of them would deal with it, so in this case they are probably just investigating the ward carefully*.”

“Trust..... I think he believes them,” and then I remembered one thing. The line that Kouta-san said when she was taking on Misachi-san. “By the way, Kouta-san, what did you mean by that?”

“What do you mean by *that*?” she asked back, intentionally. “I do not remember becoming intimate enough with you to be able to understand what your pronouns refer to. Or perhaps that is what you wish, dear friend?”

“Please do not deflect the question. You said to Misachi-san while pointing to Shito-kun. *And be used in one of the Professor’s human experiments? – like this simplistic fool lying down over here*.”

I said, mimicking Kouta-san’s sarcastic tone of voice. I felt like I replicated her voice fairly well, but for whatever reason, she simply made a face. I cleared my throat, and then forced the conversation to continue. “What did you mean by that?”

“There is no meaning or anything. It is consummate to take it literally,” Kouta-san seemed to have been extremely bothered, as she answered with a dismissive tone. “In other words, Oogaki Shito-kun was a subject just the same as Utsurigi Gaisuke. Of course, in his case, you could find plenty of replacements, so it wouldn’t be entirely accurate to call them *just the same*, but he is an extraordinary existence nonetheless.”

“Extraordinary existence.....”

That is probably the truth. I had not yet been able to see the wisdom of Shito-kun yet, but that was simply because there was no such opportunity. Him being a talented human being was proven just by the fact that he lived in this facility.

However, if the term *human experiment* that Kouta-san used matched what I imagined, then perhaps things would begin to take a different meaning. An experimental specimen for the Professor and to be a research subject. In other words,

"A **Genius Creation Project** – perhaps?" Kouta-san kept an ear to the wireless device as she spoke in a somewhat joking tone. "However, can we speak about that when everything is over? Even you cannot think that why Oogaki Shito exists in this facility and what role he takes, has anything to do with Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke, can you?"

Maybe. I did not know. I do not know that, either. I did not know anything. I did not know anything at all.

And just then.

My thoughts froze at the words spoken by Koutari-san across the wireless device.

"Neo. About this incident."

2

"Neo. This incident, what do you think?"

"What do I think? I don't think a thing, Koutari-san. Well, I think we're in a bit of a bind, of course. Utsurigi-san passing away leaves us without any options. Granted, the Professor seems to be scheming something."

"Scheming. That blue-haired girl."

"Yes yes, that, indeed. She is the former leader of *Cluster* after all. You could say she's even better than Utsurigi-san as **material**. And still not even 20. Much easier to handle than Utsurigi-san."

"She does not look easy to handle."

"Perhaps so. As an individual that may be the case. But you shan't forget we have the two acquaintances of hers as hostages, Koutari-san."

"Hostages. Hostages."

"Yes. Leaving aside that black-clothed woman – given that she did not seem too close to the Lady – that boy is a useful card. The lover of the direct descendant of the Kunagisa Syndicate lineage, that's an S-rank rare card that doesn't come along very often. Well, leaving aside its value, it's definitely a rare."

"Indeed. I don't understand, but that blue-haired girl seems attached to that brat."

"Yes. Although the Professor had told us to expect a girl with no emotions. Like real access to a machine. Although from an objective perspective – or at least from my perspective, she does not look like anything special. She does not look intellectual. That black-clothed woman seems much more intellectual."

"You cannot determine one's intellect from their outward appearances..... you cannot judge someone based on their appearance."

"Well that is as you say. I understand that too, of course. I've heard enough through the grapevine about the Lady of Kunagisa's abilities. That's why I can't say I don't understand why the Professor's so desperate to frame her."

“Although it’s unclear whether it’s just a framing.”

“You’re still saying that? Well, that’s true. What the Professor is doing is not entirely impossible, however difficult it may be to prove anything.”

“There’s no need to prove anything.”

“Perhaps. You don’t need to do anything as painstaking as proving it as long you just brute force things into place. The problem would be dealings with the Kunagisa Syndicate. Or shall we call it negotiations, but in either case the result would be the same. They would not remain silent if we were to try using one of them as a specimen.”

“Just have to say they volunteered.”

“Like with Utsurigi-san? That may be one way, but how would you get her to say that?”

“Stop forgetting what you said yourself.”

“Ahh, hostages. I see. Mmhmm – that is not a bad idea. Not bad at all.”

“Although we did use the same trick for that pervert, so if someone were to accuse us of being one-trick ponies we would be guilty as charged.”

“That pervert? Ahh, you mean Utsurigi-san. Well, true. However there is no need to seek aesthetics for matters like this. We are not artists but scientists. And unlike Utsurigi-san’s case, this time we have a specific hostage, that boy. In other words, along with locking up the Lady of Kunagisa, we would have to lock up that boy. Would that not be the case?”

“It would. But that’s a blessing.”

“My, my. And how so?”

“That blue-haired girl lacks recognition of reality. In other words, it doesn’t matter to her where she is. Put another way, she’s everywhere and nowhere at the same time.”

“A rather poetic expression for Koutari-san. Oh, excuse me, I was poking fun. Please, do go on.”

“It doesn’t matter whether she’s at home or whether she’s in this facility. As long as that brat is **by her side**.”

“Oh hoh, I see. That does seem to be the case. That means that seventh ward would become their lovely nest. Although they would be kept under watch 24-7, so it does not sound so well. But it does not sound terribly bad, either.”

“Although that’s only the case for the blue-haired girl.”

“Ah, right. The ER Program Dropout Boy does not seem satisfied just by being with the Lady of Kunagisa, after all. Well, he’s a difficult boy to grasp, so I cannot say much.”

“You can grasp him just fine. The problem is just that you can grasp him so well that none of it actually matters.”

“Okay, you win that round. That is indeed true. As you would expect of Koutari Hinayoshi, your insight is magnificently brilliant! Hmm, as you say, even with the Lady of Kunagisa doting on him so much, the problem remains on his end. What does the Professor mean to do there? He is an individual unaffiliated with the Kunagisa Syndicate. His family and friends would fret if he were to disappear.”

“He does not seem the type to have many friends.”

“That can be said. He is a quite silver-tongued and friendly boy, but that may have been brought about by his fear of coming in contact with other people – well, psychiatrists would say that, but in his case it feels like there is something much more complex going on. There is something about him that I can’t place. I suppose you could say he’s rather similar to the Lady of Kunagisa and Utsurigi in that sense. Most terrifying are not the human beings that can do anything, but rather the human beings you can’t predict. Especially when they’re young. Anyways, the contemporary world isn’t carefree enough to not raise a ruckus when someone goes missing.”

“If you say so. I disagree.”

“Well, perhaps. The serial killer case in Kyoto where the Lady of Kunagisa lives has yet to be resolved, after all. You definitely cannot be carefree in this world. However, just because–”

“Neo. What I find problematic is not that brat but more the one you call the *black-clothed woman*.”

“Oh. And why would that be? Umm, she was – Suzunashi-san, was she? Suzunashi Neon-san.”

“Yes. What do you think Professor Kyouichirou intends to do with her?”

“Ahh, well you only need one hostage. But for secretiveness you cannot just let her go back. But keeping her here would cause the same problems as with the boy. In other words, her family and friends would panic.”

“Has the Professor not investigated her? He was supposed to have done a background check.”

"Ahh, he did say that didn't he. We didn't have time, so he wasn't able to get much in-depth data. We didn't even know that boy partook in the ER Program until Miyoshi-san mentioned it, after all. And this place doesn't house a super extraordinary data seeker like the one said to have resided in *Cluster*. Granted, now that I think about it, if you consider the secretiveness of the ER3 System that may have been expected. Umm, so what was it? I don't remember."

"– I tried looking into it earlier, and it's not good."

"Not good? That boy's history?"

"No. Suzunashi Neon."

"Huh. What sort of history? That's curious."

"I actually came here to discuss that. I can fill you in on the details later, but it would be incredibly dangerous to try to lock up that woman."

"Do you mean that it would be more dangerous than to lock up the Lady of Kunagisa or that boy? That does not sound like good news."

"It makes me hesitate to even bring it up to the Professor. After all, that *Mad Demon* is completely caught up in working out how to frame the blue-haired girl. We might get dragged into the mess."

"Dragged in... alright then, Koutari-san. Then I have a good idea. How about this? The two of us bring forth the come up with the true suspect behind the Utsurigi-san murder. We can point our fingers like a shounen manga. *The suspect is you!* It's Koutari-san and I after all, we're a pretty good pair."

"No."

"If you say so. That's a shame. However, the problem remains, so what do you think? Do you think the Lady of Kunagisa is the suspect?"

"Who knows. It doesn't matter who the suspect is, in this case."

"Is that so – that may indeed be the case. It may indeed be the same. However, it's quite something to kill a person. Imagining someone so vicious in this facility makes me feel goosebumps."

"*Kill one man, and you are a murderer. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill them all, and you are a god.* Jean Rostand's words."

"Woah. You said it first. Well, that might be true. Killing Utsurigi-san may be essentially the same as killing some hundreds of people. They did after all essentially kill the countless people that should have **followed the**

footsteps of Utsurigi-san. Though they do say *the death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic.*"

"It's the truth."

"Indeed."

"However, there is one more thing that can be said."

"Uh huh. And what is that one? Oh don't be such a tease, Koutari-san. It's between the two of us. I'll end up skinny if you keep toying with me like that. What is that one more thing?"

"That the Utsurigi Gaisuke death was a **suicide**."

3

"That Utsurigi Gaisuke's death was a suicide. And I don't mean comparatively."

I immediately froze upon hearing those words through the wireless device. I subconsciously crowded over the device, and as a result, bumped into Kouta-san's nose. "Augh," she yelped as she backed up a bit.

"– you can hear without being so close, dear friend. That hurt a little."

"Sorry....."

I absent-mindedly apologized and leaned just a bit back from the device. Even so, I could recognize that I was (meaninglessly) close to the device. I could recognize it, but still, I did not feel like backing up any more.

"....."

"Suicide? What do you mean suicide, Koutari-san?" Neo-san said with his usual, flamboyant tone. "He was obviously killed by someone else. Of course, every sealed-room case starts with a suicide theory, but that one's pretty obviously far from any theories like that. And it was sealed because of the autolock security."

"That's not what I meant by suicide," Koutari-san said with his low, mumbling voice. "Think about it, Neo. Does the Utsurigi Gaisuke we know seem like the kind of guy who'd die without putting up a fight?"

"Huh. Well, I've never seen him personally so I can't really say anything. But based on phone calls and emails, and from what I've heard about his past, that's probably true. He doesn't seem like a very calm type."

Indeed, that was true. I only spoke to Utsurigi for an hour, but I could say that he had a strong sense of self esteem – if I were to borrow Kunagisa's words, he had a strong will. For better or for worse, he was a genius academic that looked down on others with self-righteousness wrapped in pride. Would that Utsurigi Gaisuke allow himself to be killed by someone? Of course not. Of course, not unless the opponent were to be *Dead Blue*.

"However, he has actually simply allowed himself to be killed," Neo-san retorted. "And not just killed, but violated beyond anything else. You know,

it felt like the killer wasn't happy with just killing. In other words, couldn't it be said that because of that personality, because he was not the type to just allow himself to be killed, that he ended up like that? For us academics, anyways."

"We would have to agree to disagree, I think. However, let us return to the start," Koutari-san stoically spoke. "Why was Utsurigi Gaisuke imprisoned here?"

"The reason for his imprisonment. Well outwardly it was as a research fellow, and behind the scenes it was as a think tank for the Professor, and further behind that was as a research specimen for the Professor."

"That's not what I mean. Why Utsurigi Gaisuke himself agreed."

"Ahh – I see."

It seemed Neo-san nodded. I nodded too.

Yes, that – the reason why Utsurigi remained here. I wondered about that too. Yesterday myself, and Kunagisa, were deftly side-stepped, but it seemed Utsurigi was being blackmailed with *something* (although Utsurigi roared with laughter when I brought that up yesterday).

"Umm, what was it. I was never actually told, so I don't really know. But it was something like some grand crime he'd committed in the past – in other words, that he was being threatened that if we would release information about some of the crimes he'd committed while in *Cluster*?"

"No. That was the true outward farce."

"Uh huh. I see, so we'd spread false rumors to hide the truth. As underhanded and painstakingly done as always, that Professor. So, what do you know, Koutari-san?"

"I heard from him personally before," Koutari-san said, surprisingly. "It was probably a slip of the tongue for him – but it was about *Kunagisa Tomo's birth*."

Neo-san went silent for a moment at that. I went silent. I could not help but go silent. Kunagisa's birth.....? Did Koutari-san say that just now?

Seriously?

Is that true? It must be a lie. That cannot be true. If, if we were to assume that to be the case, there was no reason for Utsurigi-san to say that to Koutari-san. That manipulative man would not leak that to anyone under the guise of a slipped tongue.

Not such a thing.

”..... what do you mean?” Neo-san asked with a forcibly joking tone. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t, either,” Koutari-san answered. “But in short, Utsurigi Gaisuke was being blackmailed with such a weakness. The blue-haired girl was and still is of great importance to Utsurigi Gaisuke. After all, she was his leader during his *Cluster* years. If he were to refuse the demands, or escape, the secret would see the light of day – well, I don’t know that for sure. It’s pretty questionable whether even the *Mad Demon* would risk the wrath of the Kunagisa Syndicate for no gain. However–”

However, that sort of threat.

“That sort of threat has effect because it is never executed. The *what if* must remain in the back of the mind. As a result, Utsurigi Gaisuke remained – is how it was.”

“Uh hu. I see – however, what of it, Koutari-san? For what reason Utsurigi-san remained here, for what reason the Professor locked up Utsurigi-san here, ultimately doesn’t matter because the result is the same. Utsurigi-san no longer being here throws the outward appearance and behind-the-scenes stuff in the bin.”

“However, this time that Kunagisa Tomo came here,” Koutari-san said. “And that creates a contradiction. The contradiction in that he remained here for the blue-haired girl but remaining here would not be to the blue-haired girl’s benefit.”

“So – he committed suicide?”

“Theoretically. If he were to die, the Professor wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. Blackmailing the dead is meaningless.”

I could nod at Koutari-san’s opinion – or rather his theory. At the very least, I could agree with it on an emotional level. We are talking about that Utsurigi who had the gall to call Kunagisa his Kaiser. If the threat had to do with Kunagisa – he may opt for death instead. If that were the case, then was yesterday’s meeting more of a will? To his former leader, and then after his passing, the one who would look over that leader. That would also make what Utsurigi had said to Kunagisa yesterday, *I guess it’s time to restore my reputation*, make more sense.

Not regaining honor nor clearing his name.

Restoring his reputation.

Regaining his name.

However, if one were to take another look at this, you could find another contradiction.

"However, Koutari-san," and as expected, Neo-san was also able to pick up on that contradiction. "That's odd. That ends up being very odd. If Utsurigi was killed – or we can call it suicide, then it placed the Lady of Kunagisa in a precarious situation. After all, she's locked up in a cage right now and looks to be imprisoned in this facility for eternity."

"That is as you say," Koutari-san seemed to recognize that contradiction from the start, and accepted Neo-san's retort. "Anyways–"

Koutari-san was about to say something when some noise interfered with the device. The sound was terribly hair-raising, and I could not stop myself from turning down the volume. We could no longer hear Koutari-san or Neo-san's voices.

"– did it break?"

"No, a phone call," Kouta-san said calmly. "There was a phone in that room, right? There was probably a call to that from somewhere. Even landline phones create radio waves, however little. It's the same reason why cell phones have interference when used next to a computer. The radio waves collide, and because this one was weaker, it lost, I guess."

"You guess. This is rather delicate, it seems," I thought, exasperated, and leaned back and sat down on the rooftop. "..... Neo-san seemed to be putting in some effort to get more out of Koutari-san..... but there is not much progress."

"Do you think so? It sounded rather important."

"Well it was certainly important," I nodded at Kouta-san. "From a subjective standpoint I could agree with the notion that Utsurigi's death was suicide. I could agree, however, this is not the time to be debating such possibilities. It is acceptable to discuss this when there is time to spare..... but right now, the reality is that Utsurigi was killed by someone. That cannot be refuted. You cannot commit suicide that way. Whether you let yourself be killed or put up a fight as you are killed, you are still killed."

"Hmm..... that may be," Kouta-san crossed her arms. "However, what did they mean by *Kunagisa Tomo's birth*? Do you know?"

"No, I do not."

Immediate response. However, no matter how you look at it, it was too immediate. Kouta-san looked at me with suspicion. I did not care.

Regardless of whether it is an obvious lie, I do not take back what I have said. I must not.

"Well, we shall leave it at that. There is no point delving into Kunagisa-san's matters....." after glaring at each other for a few seconds, Kouta-san was the one who gave up. "..... still, they are having a long phone call. I would imagine they should be hanging up just about now. Or perhaps it truly did break."

Kouta-san began tweaking the device. I looked at that Kouta-san from the corner of my eye and sighed once again. Ever since I stepped foot inside this facility, aside from when I was asleep, I felt like I sighed at least once an hour. I dislike and am uncomfortable with losing control of my emotions, but the waves are hard to hold off. Staying here for another three days would probably cause me to go insane. Or perhaps I already am in that process. I thought that while thinking back on my actions to this point.

I looked at my watch. Precisely one hour remaining.

"Ah. It connected."

Kouta-san said as she placed the device back on the ground. I straightened myself, having been leaning back, and then leaned my face in toward the device again.

"..... .....– what?"

"Well, you see," Neo-san said with extraordinary clarity. "Listen carefully, Koutari-san. This is extremely important."

"? What?"

"That was from the Professor. Apparently we've got a crisis. And not just any crisis, an extreme crisis, a crisis of a hundred years."

So said Neo-san with a bit of an old-fashioned choice of words, but it was oddly enunciated. Yes. As if. As if he were making sure he were communicating to Kouta-san and myself listening in through a wireless device. As if there was something he needed to tell us no matter what.

Naturally, his throat began sounding.

Kouta-san also leaned forward to listen.

"The boy that accompanied the Lady of Kunagisa – has disappeared."

First, I struggled to make a decision. And the next moment.

I had already spun my body around. Running. Without thinking. Jumped across the two-meter gap between the fifth ward and fourth ward with one step, and landed on the rooftop of the fourth ward. And then continued

running to the door. Could hear a voice from behind. Kouta-san's voice. Saying something. Could not hear. No time to hear. Pulled the knob to open the door into the ward, but it was locked and stopped. Who cares. Concentrated my strength and kicked the area near the knob. Even if the door itself is sturdy, if you continue to apply impact on areas where moving parts meet, it is easy to destroy this sort of lock. Who said that again? Do not remember. Someone over across. Problem is that it leaves proof, but who cares about proof. Now that they know.

After some number of kicks, the door opened. Was destroyed.

"– what the heck."

The one remaining hour. That was blown away like paper shreds. Why did they find out about my absence. Why. Perhaps Kasugai-san went back to the basement. Or perhaps Shito-kun or Misachi-san woke up earlier than expected. No, come to think of it, Misachi-san had already fired a shot before then. That sound may have reached someone. Maybe Kokoromi-sensei had alerted the Professor. Or perhaps my phone call to Hime-chan had been spotted in the records. And perhaps someone found it suspicious. Any of them seemed plausible, yet all of them were unnatural theories. However there is no reality that is fully naturally. This is the reality. Shit, what good are words, reason? That is all they are, a pile of over-thinking and misunderstanding and tunnel-visioning.

Already found out, there was no reason not to use the elevator. However, there is no elevator shaft leading to the rooftop, so I had to use the stairs. First the fourth floor, and then the elevator. I decided that much and then took a step toward the stairs.

And then my shoulder was grabbed from behind.

It was Kouta-san.

"– where do you think you're going?"

Kouta-san's voice was a bit disheveled. It was apparently no simple task even for Kouta-san to have caught up across this distance after I had a head start. Ahh, right. I took too much time breaking the door. Shit. I don't have time to be dealing with you.

"– there is nothing you can do by returning to the cage now."

Nothing? Is that so? Perhaps. Probably. Kouta-san was saying the correct thing. Nothing will happen by returning. That is not wrong. But **that is why**

I need to return. I tried to shake off Kouta-san's hand. However, I could not shake off her firm grip.

"…. I am grateful to you, Ishimaru Kouta-san," I said, as if I were growling. "Really, because of you, I was able to not lose hope these few hours. I was able to dream that I still have a path before me. That is why I am grateful."

"Why're you going on like you're about to die?" Kouta-san forced me to turn around. "It is not as if hope has been lost. No, now that we've been found, you are the only hope remaining. For Kunagisa-san and Suzunashi-san, and for yourself. Yet you're going to throw that away yourself?"

"I am not throwing it away. I am just returning things," I answered automatically. "From here on out you are no longer relevant. That is why–"

A dry sound echoed. It took about three seconds for me to realize Kouta-san had slapped me. It did not hurt at all. I had been excited so much that it seemed my senses had completely gone numb. However, it was hot.

"Not relevant? After acting together for several hours, you still have the galls to say I have nothing to do with this? You–" Kouta-san also became enraged, yet she lowered her voice, forcing herself to control her emotions. "….. you are going quite off-track."

"– I am told that a lot," I nodded slowly. "Really, a lot."

"Do you remember what I told you on the rooftop of the seventh ward? If you decide to act on your own again, I shall break off the alliance."

"Please do, it has no bearing on me," I bowed my head. "Thank you for all the help you have giv-"

I was not able to finish. Because Kouta-san pushed me back. I fell down the stairs from my back, and without being able to brace myself was slammed against thirteen steps until I spilled out onto the landing. I finally stopped after crashing into the wall, and mumbled, "Ow that hurt." But in truth it did not hurt. If anything I felt relieved. I felt like it was the first time I had felt unrestrained since entering this facility.

And then something rained down from above. By my feet, it clattered. It was that lock-picking knife, the anti-lock blade. I looked at it, and then looked back up. There stood Kouta-san, keeping her follow-through after throwing the knife.

“A parting gift, dear friend,” she said her parting words with a reluctant, truly reluctant tone. “Because you should avoid kicking down doors. It hurts your body. And that knife can be used as a weapon. The knife in your right pocket is not enough, is it? I recommend not using the pistol. But all of this may be pointless and an unnecessary bother.”

”＿＿”

I opened my mouth, but I was unable to say anything to the disappearing Kouta-san. Eventually, I could not see her anymore, and I picked up the knife. And then I stood up. It appeared I suffered no broken bones or bruises. It seemed she had skillfully knocked me down, that Ishimaru Kouta-san, I thought as I looked at the knife. I thought as I remembered the lady who called me a friend until the very end. When all was said and done, I had simply used her, and was unable to return the favor. That was my one regret. However, that may not be limited to just her. They say you should interact with people, but I have always siphoned away from others, and burdened them. If even one person I encountered did not exist to this point in my life, I would probably be long dead.

That was why.

“I need to put an end, to even nonsense.....”

Yes. Return. Return everything.

Just a bit, everything. All half.

Like when I first met that blue boy.

Like before that meeting.

I hated deciding. I hated choosing. I was unable to be interested in others. I was unable to be interested in myself. I hated conflict with people. I hated being laughed at. I could not laugh. I could not cry. I could not enjoy nor get angry. I could not do anything. I did not feel anything. I did not attain anything. I broke them because I could. I wanted them but I could not so I destroyed them. I wanted them so I threw them away. I wanted to trust them so I betrayed them. I liked them so I rejected them. I wanted to protect them so I hurt them. It felt homely so I escaped. We were friendly so I was lonely. I was envious so I crushed them. Necessities until they were unnecessary. Fondness until hatred. I acted like a cold person. I acted like a shallow person. I acted like a wise person. I acted like a smart person. I acted like a foolish person. I acted like a person. I mimicked someone else. I was unable to mimic someone else. I admired someone else. I hated myself.

I tried to like myself. I tried to like someone else. I tried to love someone else. I could not love someone other than myself. I could not love myself. I did not know how to love or be loved, equally. That was why I ran. But I could not escape. From anywhere. From anyone.

Life sucked.

”..... so let’s have a masterpiece.”

I’ll kill them, slice them to bits, line them all up, trim them down to size – and set them out for all the world to see.

I felt quiet.

I confirmed the knife in the pocket of my coat, and then with the lock-picking knife in my left hand, I began climbing the stairs.

Began falling down the stairs.

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1) Famous katana

2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uir%C5%8D

3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yokan

4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osamu_Dazai

5) http://www.amazon.com/imogayu-Japanese-Edition-Akutagawa-Ryunosuke-ebook/dp/B00DXJBR52

二日目（6）——たったひとつの冴えないやりかた

Day 2 (6)

The One Stupid Means

0

Other people determine your value.
Other people also determine other peoples' values.

1

I ended up using the stairs to the ground floor. I walked out to the hallway of the fourth floor once, but the elevator was stopped at the ground floor, and even in my excited state, I was able to reason that it would be faster to simply run down the stairs. Not that I was in any excited state. I was so calm that my body temperature was around zero degrees.

I fell down the stairs two, three times, and crashed into the landing. But I was able to immediately stand up. I was probably not getting off without a scratch, but it did not hurt much. Having come this far, it seems I had finally gotten somewhere. Although there is no way human beings can control their nervous system, at the very least, I was doing something similar. Speaking of which, when life forms take fatal damage – for example, when half their head has been crushed, or when they have been split in half at the torso, in such cases – I have heard that their nervous system gets cut off. They only have a few minutes left to live no matter what happens, so their body decides it is useless to send signals warning of impending doom. That made me feel much more pleased. It is a nasty story, but it made me feel very pleased. There is no value to pain to those who do not fear death. With just one decision, life forms can become this strong. Or perhaps, just by throwing away one decision, life forms can

become this weak. Either way, I felt that it was splendid. I thought that as I picked myself up off the wall after my fourth slip.

It did not hurt nor itch to tumble – well, really it left a bit of an itchy feeling – which I was grateful about, but it was problematic that I could not walk properly. It felt like my feet were not touching the ground. I felt extremely unstable. As if I were floating in a zero-gravity field. Speaking of which, a long time ago – before I participated in the ER3 System's ER Program – when I was thirteen, with Kunagisa Tomo, we talked about that. Whether by the time we became adults people would be able to travel to space with ease. They might be able to. Do you want to go? Not really. Not interested. How about you, Kunagisa-kun? I want to go. Mmhmm. You want to go despite being a hikikomori? A pretty distasteful being. What's distasteful? A pathetic life form. I'm not pathetic. Maybe. But space is pathetic. There is nothing worth anything in this world, anyways. There is nothing worth anything anywhere. Nowhere? Nowhere. Even if you go to space, if you look at Earth, you just think, "it's blue." That is all you think by going to space, you know? If you want to see that, you can just look at a picture book. Not just blue, but red, black, green, everything is there. Going to space is just a roundabout way of confirming how insignificant you are. The extreme result of romanticism. It would be better to just look at your hair then. Eheheh. Stop laughing for no reason like that. Disturbing. I hate that about you. I love that you say stuff like that. Oh shut up.

"– stop trying to flirt....."

A truly pitiful brat. I thought that myself. So conceited, so conceited, so conceited. So ecstatic, so ecstatic, so ecstatic. And misconstruing that as ego. Seeing just the surface of the world, or perhaps seeing just the back of the world. In any case, just looking at one side of things. Feeling wise after having a limited perspective and speaking as if having seen enlightenment. Afraid beyond afraid of having a hollow self crumbled to bits. And what remained after crumbling was nothing. The hollow self had become myself. A tragedy, a farce that did not elicit laughs nor tears. And the farce has not yet come to an end. It continues, forever. Forever, frozen. In other words, I have not grown one bit since being gripped by *Dead Blue*. I have not accomplished anything. Because there are other things to be accomplished.

Fifth tumble. At the same time, I arrived on the ground floor. It seemed this time I hit my head pretty hard. As usual, the pain was just a dull thing,

but my consciousness seemed to wane just a bit. And again I had a flashback. First, my family. Little sister. Big sister. Father. Mother. Uncle and aunt on both sides. Memories of my childhood. I could not recall the face of a single friend. I did not know of any. No one know of me. Accident. Crumbling. Plane. My little sister disappears around then. Good bye. Kasumioka-san. Nao-san. And then Kunagisa Tomo. Everything else disappeared. Was this also a revolving lantern? I do not know the meaning of the word. ER3 System. Meeting Kokoromi-sensei. The classmates I could not get along with. The few classmates I did get along with. Omokage Magokoro. Parting with sensei. And then a lot happened. I could not remember most of that. If I could, my head would explode. Dropping out. Japan. Kyoto. Reunion with Kunagisa Tomo. The same Kunagisa as before. The same myself as before. Asano Miiko-san. Suzunashi Neon-san. Pateren-san and the run-away siblings. What happened to her after she left for Tokyo. Hashima drenched by crows. The style-less artist. The decapitated Fool. The unstable cook. The unpleasant fortune-teller. He, the same. The wandering Lady and the triplet maids. I want to see them. Aikawa Jun-san. Mankind's strongest contractor. May. Meeting them. And contact with the human failure. Pointless conversations. Conversations without self-love. The worst witch, Nanananami Nanami. The girl who calls me Master appears – when my memories caught up to Hime-chan, I snapped back to reality. What the hell, I mumbled. I mumbled, consciously. I remember a lot. Jeez, my memory is not completely useless after all. Really, jeez. I picked myself up off the ground. I picked up the lock-picking knife that had clattered away from the ground, and slid it into the keyhole on the doorknob. And then after shaking a bit, the lock easily clicked. I gripped the knob. I still could not feel anything. Given how my body was functioning, there did not seem to be any broken bones. It was a careless conclusion, but I decided to believe that, and opened the door.

Dim, though a light source was attached to the ceiling. Just a luminescent bulb that seemed like it would cut out any moment, in the basement of the fourth ward that I stepped out into. As soon as I walked out, I heard voices from somewhere. Relieved. It seemed my hearing had not yet gone numb. I thought my eardrums may have burst from tumbling so much, but it was a needless worry. I perked my ears.

"— I —— . ——- so ——"

This voice – who? It was terrible monotone, as unemotional as if a synthetic voice were speaking, and there was no break between the words. Kasugai-san. Kasugai-san is here. Where? Ahead. Of course, by the cages ahead.

"– if that boy has gone somewhere it means I am at fault. That would cause me some trouble. That's why I must ask you. Understand?"

Kasugai-san's voice. Calm – well, it was not so much, but it was also not very angry. I carefully, keeping my footsteps silent and my breathing inaudible, one step at a time, slowly progressed down the hallway. I was suddenly beset by a headache. I may have hurt my brain a bit with one of my tumbles. Not that it matters. Not that it matters for a brain that was broken from the start. Not that it matters, so please, wait a bit. Just wait a little bit more. I want some time. There is still something I need to do.

That was when I almost burst out laughing. That was when I almost burst out laughing for the first time in a while. Something I need to do. Me! For of all people me to end up with something like that. Even a child who has abandoned every sense of obligation and every right can end up with something like that! Then, perhaps in the end I did not simply stop moving. Perhaps, to this point, I had simply acted as if I did not notice. It was probably the latter. In other words, that means that even more than I had ever realized, and even more than anyone else has realized, I am a giant fool.

In the end, however, I did not laugh.

"Who knows?"

A nostalgic voice. I had only been gone for a few hours, but Suzunashi-san's voice sounded nostalgic to my ears.

"Maybe he went home? Maybe he got too angry at this treatment. Inoji was raised pretty extravagantly, despite how he looks, so maybe he just couldn't stand being here for a second longer."

"– I am not kidding," Kasugai-san's voice remained emotionless. There was no anger or sadness or hesitation or anything. "How could he have left. And if he left you must have all seen him leave. How did that boy escape? Perhaps that means there is an insider here."

Strange, I could hear some growling behind Kasugai-san's voice. Like some beast. Kasugai-san was not the one growling. Nor Suzunashi-san. Then who? Kunagisa? I felt like my legs were falling asleep. No, not my

legs. My whole body. As if the sense of pain I had sealed away was just coming back.

"Now that you mention it."

Woah.

"Boku-sama-chan saw. Ii-chan dislocated all of his joints and slid out through that crack. Ii-chan's so cool, you never know what he's going to do."

I was freed from my numbness. Relief. Kunagisa was still safe. However, the growling continued along with Kunagisa's words. What is it? Is there someone else? No, I did not sense another. While my inward senses were numbed, my outward senses were amplified a hundred, two hundred times. Then. I must do something while Kasugai-san is the only one in front of that cage.

I tried to think. Is there any good idea that I can use? I used about two seconds to think, and then I quickly shook my head. I used three whole hours thinking, and yet I was unable to come up with anything, so I could not think there any point in trying to think now. Then there is no need to think. My body automatically, without thinking, will move, I hope. Will move, I pray.

I turned the corner, and began stepping out toward the voice. Yes, if I turn the corner, I will be by the cage with Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san–

"—-....."

And then. There was Kasugai-san. In a white lab coat. She looked at me with that cool gaze of hers. By her feet was one dog. The dog that was playing with me last night. Ahh, so that is the beast behind the growling. Black and big and vicious. Like last night, there was no chain, nor even a collar. Why had she taken a dog to this floor. I did not know what Kasugai-san wanted. That was why I naturally returned my gaze to Kasugai-san. She looked a bit startled, but without showing that inner expression, she simply said, "– my."

"Why did you–"

"Ah, Ii-chan!" Kunagisa clasped the bars of the cage with an out-of-place happy voice. "Yahoo! Ii-chan! Welcome back!"

I could not respond to that voice. I simply faced Kasugai-san. But I also could not completely ignore her and glanced at Kunagisa in the cage. She looked well. At the very least, it did not look like she had been harmed any.

It seemed I had made it. Probably, had made it. Suzunashi-san was there too. Calmly, with composure, she leaned against the wall. But she looked at me, said "jeez," and then, "..... so," she continued quietly.

"Inoji. By how you look, it doesn't look like you're all ready."

"Ah. You're right. Ii-chan, you're pretty hurt. Your skin's peeled all over. And bleeding. You okay?"

What Suzunashi-san meant was, of course, with regards to the case. However, Kunagisa did not seem to care about that all, and instead worried about my health. As usual. Kunagisa never worries about herself. Why. I did not know.

I took out the lock-picking knife, and with unstable footing (..... I meant to be, walking, though.....) walked closer to the cage. Huh. The key is open. Why? Perhaps Kasugai-san had opened it. I looked at Kasugai-san.

"Hey – I'd rather you not do anything. Don't move."

She said something. I cannot hear. Maybe my eardrums had burst after all. I can hear but I do not understand what she is saying. I understand what she is saying but I do not know what it means. It was like easy-to-hear French. Oh well. There is nothing to be gained from hearing Kasugai-san's voice. I opened the door of the cage.

"Lets go home, Tomo."

"What? Ah, yup–"

Kunagisa hesitated. How rare. Huh. Did I say something strange? We are just going home together. Like always. Go somewhere together and then go home together. That is all. Ahh, right, I need to buy uirō on the way home. For Hime-chan's friend. Miiko-san will probably want some too, so six or seven bars.

Someone pulled my shoulder. Kasugai-san.

"– please go inside like that. I'll try not to treat you badly."

"Shut up or I'll kill you."

I turned around and shook Kasugai-san's hand off.

"Please don't get in my way. We're heading home now."

"I won't let you."

Kasugai-san did not back down, and pushed me with one arm. Pushed, I stumbled two, three steps away from the cage. Away from Kunagisa. Ahh, I have to go back. But I was obstructed. By Kasugai-san – and one dog.

And then I realized. The black dog by Kasugai-san's feet was not from last night. Looks the same, but feels totally different. Not even just like a wild beast. It was precisely a wild beast. As if glaring, as if staring at the face of an archenemy, it pointed its two eyes at me. Its front legs postured, prepared to lunge at any moment. Its weight lowered onto its back legs just a bit, as if prepared against any attack. Compared to **this**, the two dogs from last night were like domesticated puppies. They wore the same skin, but this was a completely differently life form.

"The last – of the triplet."

"Precisely."

Kasugai-san looked down just a bit at the dog.

"Of course **this** is nothing like the two you met last night and is not nearly as docile. That is the result of experimentation, you know."

The result of experimentation? What sort of experimentation must be conducted to transform one that shares the same genes to this degree? I felt like she mentioned something yesterday. I also felt that she did not say anything. I cannot remember. There is no point in remembering. What is more important is what Kasugai-san wants to do using this dog. What she meant to do to Kunagisa using this dog.

"What – are you thinking," I asked Kasugai-san. "Bringing such a wild dog along – this is no longer a joke."

"It's your fault for escaping. If only you stayed put," Kasugai-san casually answered, without any hesitation or conflict. "Now hurry up and enter the cage please. I would rather not do something like this either. But if you won't, I will. That's all."

Ordinary.

Kasugai-san's way of speaking was far too ordinary.

In this extraordinary place.

In this extraordinary situation.

It was this, ordinary.

"– I see. I get it..... **I get it**, you are like **that**, too."

I finally understood.

..... what Neo-san meant when he said *be careful especially of Kasugai-san*. Finally, in this situation, I comprehended.

I see, I see..... so that is how it is. What it means to have no conviction. It ultimately means nothing other than that she can do anything. She has no

restrictions. She has no obligations. And thus she has no boundaries. That is the the identity of this Kasugai Kasuga. Reason or theory, theory or conclusions, nothing has any meaning.

She chose nothing herself, she decided nothing herself, and that resulted in this. She binds other people without care, imprisons them, and hurts them. And that was not for any conviction of hers. Because she has none.

Professor Kyouichirou acts for his own research. Kokoromi-sensei assisted the professor for her goals, and revolts for those goals. Shito-kun and Misachi-san assisted the professor for their own sense of loyalty, and because of that sense of loyalty, easily crumbled.

But Kasugai-san is different.

She has no reason. No motive. No reason from the start. There is no understanding her, forever. If I had to describe it as anything, she is simply psychological. Incorrigible. There is no handling her. If I were to have arrived late, and she were to have set the dog free inside the cage, she would not be any different. Even if that were to ultimately kill Kunagisa, she would not be any different. She has no goals nor means, no guilt nor repentance. There is no negotiating. There is no placating or converting or threatening.

There is no conviction.

As Neo-san said, that is indeed terrifying.

However.

"That would mean she is just like me–"

I stuck my hand in my left breast pocket, and pulled out the knife. The lock-picking knife in my left hand, and the thin blade I received from Aikawa-san in my right. I faced Kasugai-san with this setup. She did not look at me with any sort of surprise, and without any sort of emotion.

"I do not think there is any point in meaningless resistance."

"Meaningless?"

"There is no meaning whatsoever. The Professor and the other researchers will be here soon. What will you do by breaking through me? Nothing."

"It is not nothing at all," I took a step closer. There was less than two meters to Kasugai-san. There is no point in using the pistol at this range. There was Kouta-san's warning, but I was also not foolish enough to use it without any practice. Even if this action of mine were to be even more

foolish. “I will break through you, and then break through the Professor, and the other researchers. That is my plan.”

“You’re insane.”

Are you seriously one to talk?

Before I could retort, Kasugai-san had snapped her fingers. And then the black dog twisted itself in motion. The snapped finger was a signal. As you would expect of Kasugai-san, a biologist. However, it was not an entirely unexpected or entirely a surprise – so without losing my cool, I jumped back with my right foot about three steps’ length. The black dog stopped in front of her, as if it meant to protect her.

“As your senior, I shall warn you that if it bites you, it’s over. I can hold him back for now – or should I say muzzle him? Either way, I can restrain him for now.”

I ignored Kasugai-san and faced the black dog. Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san said nothing. They were not in my sight, so I could not see their expression. Or perhaps they were saying something, but I could not hear them at the least .

Ahh – perhaps I have gone mad.

To not even be able to hear Kunagisa’s voice.

“I feel truly pleased..... truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly.”

I threw away the lock-picking knife. Clang, the dry sound echoed down the hallway. The black dog responded a bit to that sound, but it did not lunge. I stood no chance with both hands occupied against a dog like this. One blade is enough.

“I see – I see. You’re serious. I’m just a bit disappointed,” Kasugai-san said while seemingly, truly just a bit, but truly nonetheless, disappointed. “I thought you and I could get along.”

“I only thought that just now, Kasugai Kasuga-san.”

”– break it.”

That was the signal. The black dog unleashed its pent-up momentum like it was exploding, opening its mouth as it lunged toward me. I see. It was not standing in front of Kasugai-san to protect her. It was showing that it wanted to destroy me. I had completely misunderstood it. There was no way to survive for me, given that I nonchalantly and ignorantly chatted

with Kasugai-san. There was not, but my body moved anyways. Faster than I could think, it quickly moved.

Even I thought it was abnormal. I put out my left arm toward the mouth of that lunging black dog. To be more precise, I threw a full-body punch with so much force that one might wonder if I wanted to take out its jaw into its opened mouth that sought to rip out my throat. In the end, the legs of a dog are simply a means of movement and serve no other purpose. As a predatory animal its only weapons are its teeth – and as Kasugai-san herself let slip, only its teeth. That means it is easy to predict its path, and if you can predict its path, it is likewise easy to seal it away. And then, tragically, the habit of dogs is to not let go once it has clamped its jaws shut. Especially if its teeth have sunk into its target.

Well, that would be about it if I were to logically explain, but it was not like I was thinking anything of the sort. Simply put, the opponent opened its mouth, so I shot my arm in.

However, despite that preemptive strike, I was knocked on my back. It seems even having all my weight behind my arm was not enough to push the dog back. It appears there is a fundamental difference between the strength of humans and animals. I was pushed down on my back, and the dog ended up pinning me down. It was just like last night. However, last night there were two, and yet it was still less strenuous. Having succeeded in tackling me, the black dog pushed down on my chest with its front legs. And then it clamped down harder with its jaw locked over my left arm.

The black dog continued to clenched its teeth with more strength. As expected, it did not show any signs of wanting to let go. Well of course, it bit me through the jacket, and I had even twisted it around its mouth. It would not be able to pull its teeth out very easily. Not that this was a particularly good situation for me. If it cannot pull its teeth out, it simply needs to bite my arm off. Of course, I have a clump of muscle there, so even a large dog would have trouble just biting off my arm. Still, it would be able to crush the bones of my arm. It has enough strength for that. I could tell by its front legs pressing down on me. My nerves went haywire from the pain, and I could not resist. I could not think properly, and I was left screaming and waiting for the opponent to move – well, **normally** that would be what would happen.

But I do not currently feel any pain.

I feel nothing even having been tackled and having my arm crushed. I feel nothing. I do not feel anything. I just thought it was a shame that my left arm, which had just healed, would once again be unusable. I swung my right arm up. I swung my right arm, holding the knife, up. No mercy. The black dog realized. But it could do nothing. You were the one that sunk your teeth so deep. Regardless of the what, you need to take responsibility for things of your doing. Is that not right?

Seriously.

We are both in such crappy positions.

I stabbed the knife deep into the left eye of the black dog, into that large, black eyeball. There was almost no resistance as it crushed the socket, and I think it reached the brain of the black dog. It did not scream. In exchange, it sank its teeth into my arm with yet more strength. The muscles had long-since been destroyed, and it felt like its teeth were penetrating my bones. At this rate, I would not be exaggerating to say that it would crush my arm. Destroying the brain does not cause a life form to immediately die. Shit, how much longer? How much longer will it take for this thing to die? How long will my body last? How long will my consciousness last? Shit. Not enough destruction. Still not enough destruction. Gotta destroy. Destroy. Destroy destroy destroy. Destroy more and more. This most miserable. Too miserable life. Too miserable dream. Reality. With the rest of my strength, I used my muscles, and lifted by upper body.

"– GAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I re-gripped the knife with my right hand, and then drew a line from the skull to the torso. The opposite left arm, as if using the torque of my upper body, pulled back. In other words, my right arm dragged the knife forward, and my left arm pulled the body of the black dog – the black dog along with its teeth – abruptly backward, pulling it asunder, and with twice the power of one arm, moved the knife. The sound of bone being cut, the sound of blood vessels being ripped, the sound of skin being torn. Echoed. Perhaps my eardrums had resumed functioning, because that sound unpleasantly, yet somehow pleasantly, echoed.

Once I had dragged the knife halfway through the black torso, I pulled it out with a tremendous amount of force. Suddenly, blood began splattering. On my head. Over my body. The insides of the black dog spurted out. The black insides. The insides, like darkness was flowing forth.

Sparkling.

”– ha… ah—-”

Crumpled.

My body toppled over. I did not mean to topple over but it did. Like a battery that had run dry. Required recharging. However. My body no longer moved. The black dog fell over my body, scattering its insides. Heavy. Terribly heavy. My eyelids were heavy. Sleepy. Wanted to sleep. Wanted to go to sleep. Not yet. Not yet. Nothing has ended yet.

Clap. Clap clap.

The sound of applause.

”– amazing. You. I’m a bit in awe,” Kasugai-san said. “Perhaps I should call it moved. It’s amazing you won against such a big wild dog – but I think it’s more amazing that you can kill an animal without batting an eye. That’s pretty hard – you know. Ahh but I’m leaving aside the idiots that don’t know the value of lives though alright? To comprehend what it means to take a life and to still be able to take a life is amazing. A fool not mindful of life yet a fool that minds life or something.”

“It is a great honor to be praised by you,” I answered, panting. Was I able to enunciate properly? I do not know. ”– so. Please step aside and let us through. You don’t want to die too, do you?”

“You’re right. I think I don’t want to die after having been able to meet someone like you. But I can’t really just stand here and look unaffected after having my dog get killed….. and listen.”

Kasugai-san motioned with her hands to make as if she was listening in on something. And the reason for that was revealed the next moment. Ding. The sound of the elevator arriving on this floor, that was the sound that I heard. Elevator. It was on the ground floor when I checked when I was on the fourth floor. That the elevator that used to be on the ground floor has arrived on the ground floor means that it is on the back end of a round trip. And that it went on a round trip meant that someone was on it.

That someone was coming.

“Time’s up – you know.”

I could sense a bit of sympathy from Kasugai-san’s words. Though perhaps I was misunderstanding her. I raised my head. And then I looked at Kunagisa inside the cage. I could not see Suzunashi-san. Where did she go? Did she go somewhere? I only looked at Kunagisa.

At my Kunagisa Tomo.

Huh. Why? Why are you making such a tearful face? You are not supposed to be able to make a face like that, are you? You are always laughing. Laughing innocently. Always smiling at me no matter what. Always grinning at me no matter where. You have to be laughing happily. In enjoyment. Why? I do not understand, Kunagisa-kun. That face of yours, I have only seen it.

A single time.

Once.

..... only.

The sound of someone running over. I angled my neck to look in that direction. It was not one person. There were many. At the front was Professor Shadou Kyouichirou. Behind that was Neo Furuara-san. Koutari Hinayoshi-san. Huh. And behind that was none other than Oogaki Shito-kun. And to his side was Uze Misachi-san. Wow. They already woke up. Then Kasugai-san may have checked the cage because they sent a warning. Maybe it was bad to have left Shito-kun next to the entrance. Though I was not sure. And behind the two was Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei. Ahh. Then because Kasugai-san is already here, that meant everyone had gathered.

Maybe it is over.

I thought.

It is over.

I understood.

"In the end–"

Kasugai-san said.

"– what did you want?"

It was a question.

A terribly knowing, a terrible precise, and probably, in the entire world, only Kasugai-san could ask me that simply, clear question.

"– Love."

I mumbled.

I did not answer, but I mumbled.

"I wanted, love–"

It was a pleasant feeling. I wanted to laugh. Really, wanted to laugh.

I used my free right hand to raise my body. And then I tried to stand up. Alright then. Let me do one last struggle. My relentlessness is my sales

point. My blood-covered body. My bloodied mind. My clothing felt disgusting. My thoughts were also disgusting. But I also felt like this was all I could do. I looked at the knife. As expected of a knife given directly by mankind's strongest contractor. Despite all that destruction, it did not have a single nick. Maybe this would be easy.

To rip my neck off.

I looked at Kunagisa.

As expected, Kunagisa looked like she was about to cry. She was clutching at the cage, and mostly crying. But she was still unable to cry. It was a painful expression that crossed crying with laughing. Right. Just as I cannot laugh, she cannot cry. Just like me, she cannot cry. She does not know how to mourn. That was when she ended up with such an ugly expression. And that was terribly disappointing. I wanted to see Kunagisa's innocent, naturally pure smile in the end.

Ahh, but.

That.

Would be seeking the moon.

I realized my left arm was heavy.

The black dog, which had already scattered its life somewhere, still had its fangs stuck in my arm. I remembered Utsurigi. I remembered Utsurigi's corpse. The brain destroyed by having a scissors plunged into his eyes, his mouth, breast, and stomach cut apart, his legs impaled, his body arms sliced off, that Utsurigi Gaisuke. It seems subconsciously I had performed the exact same actions as that crime suspect. How terribly ironic. Then in truth, perhaps I was the suspect.

Well, none of that really matters at this point. Whether the action happened is not a problem. It is whether the recognition is there. That was all. The footsteps came closer. My eyes were clouded over a bit so I could not tell how far they were. But I was truly out of time. I kept hold of the knife as I put my hand to the mouth of the black dog. It was a little hard to move like this. And I felt bad to leave this by just having it dangling like this forever. I felt bad for it, so I decided to rip it off. Yet strangely it was so stuck that it did not come off easily. No, this is not stuck, but rather its teeth are lodged in too deep. And it stiffened. Yes, in other words, a cadaveric spasm. A cadaveric spasm, the result of a violent death. I had just

talked about it with sensei a couple hours ago, but I could not imagine then that I would see it like this.

”– huh–”

And, as I was about to destroy the mouth of the black dog with the knife, when I had slid the knife into the gap, this time I froze. I had to freeze.

Did I just say **cadaveric spasm**? Did I say that?

”– you! What’re you doing!”

Shito-kun’s voice echoed around the hallway. However, that was meaningless to me. That was meaningless to me, having been frozen. My eardrum did not even vibrate. Wait a second. Think. Think. Calm down. No, do not calm down. Hurry. Right there. Reach out. With your arm. Just a bit, right there. Just a little bit more.

In other words..... **is that how it was?**

I did not notice myself letting go of the knife. It fell.

Utsurigi Gaisuke. If. If that was the type of human being I think. That conversation yesterday. Utsurigi Gaisuke. *Malignant Bacteria*. Green Green Green. *Cluster*. Cracker. The reality that you would not imagine Utsurigi to quietly let himself be killed. For Kunagisa Tomo. For just that reason, the man that was obedient toward Professor Kyouichirou. The once and former comrade of Kunagisa Tomo.

Crucifixion.

It that was just priming.

If that was not a mirage but a priming.

“Hey, you! You! Are you listening?”

Thump, someone pushed me. Probably Shito-kun. That body of mine that I had finally pulled off the ground became intimate with it again. It hurt. My sense of pain was rejuvenating. It seemed by nervous system was coming back online. My whole body hurt. Especially my arm. Of course. Probably half my muscle had been ripped into. I will not complain. I did take the opponent’s life, after all.

Belatedly, I felt bad for it.

However, it was not particularly wrong.

You were not wrong.

You were not wrong but your life died.

Not wrong.

Not wrong.

“Hey Kasugai – what is this–” “Haa – well you know– –” “Whatcha doin– hey man–” ” wait–” ”– explain yourself– –” ”..... dog.....” ”—-” ” blood—-fang ” ” medi cation ”

“Can you please shut up for a moment, everyone.”

I quietly said.

“Right now, for the first time since I was born, I feel like praising myself. Yes, I understand it might just be a delusion. I understand. I do not care if it is a delusion. So please, let me taste this feeling for just a little bit more–”

But that was not allowed. Even that wish was not allowed. I was slowly beginning to lose consciousness. This time, because of relief. But I thought I might not be able to wake up anymore.

Might not be able to wake up.....

Well, that sounds pretty good.

I feel so happy right now.

”.....”

What my fading sight finally glimpsed at the end was Kunagisa Tomo again. It was fading so I could no longer see anything, but my sight was blue.

Pure,

Clear,

Beautiful,

And comfortable.

How – blue.

”.....”

Can I say something selfish?

I love you.

2

Let me relate an old story.

Somewhere there was one, just one boy that was beyond saving. He was a boy that had a terribly twisted personality and relied on a brutally broken sense of valuation to let his trail of nonsense carry him through life.

Somewhere there was one, just one girl that was beyond saving. She was a girl that had a terribly honest personality and relied on a brutally correct sense of valuation to smile and innocently live.

Normally that would be the end of this story. The boy would live a short, slightly unfortunate and slightly tragic life, and the girl would live a short, slightly blessed and slightly elegant life. The world in which the boy lived and the world in which the girl lived were completely different places, after all.

However contrary to any reason, the boy met the girl, and the girl met the boy. It can genuinely be asked who and for what purpose caused this to happen. What sort of whim, what sort of consideration caused him and the girl to meet. It would be cruel to both the boy and the girl to chalk it up as mere coincidence or destiny or miracle.

Many humans died.

Many inhumans died.

The boy died a lot.

the girl also died a lot.

The boy killed a lot.

The girl did not kill anyone.

And then, unable to handle the burden of sin any longer, unable to carry the weight of punishment any longer, the boy escaped, alone.

Escape, alone, leaving the girl behind.

”– a stereotypical old tale.....”

Making it sound like a tragedy of myself the victim.

As if I were carrying on my back all the misfortune in the world. As if I personally owned all the unluck in the world.

The poor, pitiable victim.

Despite being the perpetrator. Despite being the perpetrator. Despite being the perpetrator.

Despite not being pitiable at all.

"People like me are everywhere....."

And then just now, alone, I mumbled.

My left arm was wrapped superfluously in bandaging. It was probably not superfluous though, I thought. Kokoromi-sensei said this was still just an emergency measure. The fangs of the black dog had not reached the bone, but the jaws were quite powerful, and that the radial bone of my left arm was avulsion fractured or something. Of course, that was not all for my injuries, given that I had tumbled down the stairs so many times, so I had apparently been hurt all over. I say *apparently* like it is someone else's business, but I honestly do not feel anything. My sense of pain had mostly recovered, but Kokoromi-sensei had shot me with painkillers, so my sense of pain had been numbed yet again.

"Even so normally ya'd be dyin'a pain ya know."

Said sensei. A certified professor of dissection biology said that, so it must be true. In that case, it seems my body is weird after all. To the point that maybe it would be best for sensei to dissect me once.

In the fifth ward, on the rooftop of Neo-san's research ward, alone, I thought.

However, it is still nonsense. What is going to start now? You could call it a pre-established harmonic farce, and you could not. A farce would be why has taken place so far – the half-day that I had partook in as the main character was all a farce.

As such, because of that, when I realized everything – yes, truly everything – that farce ended. There is no need for a curtain call. There is no need for the curtain to even be lowered. Everything ended there.

Then what is the scene that is about to take place?

"This is, in other words, like an aftertaste....."

No, that is wrong.

This is more like a premonition. A premonition of something incredibly important about to begin. A rite of passage that cannot be avoided no matter what. If I thought of it that way, I felt like even this nonsensical

scene held some meaning. Though I had no intention of complaining whether it had meaning or whether it did not.

So, here we go.

The one and only puppetshow by the user of nonsense.

First, the two meters from the fifth ward to the fourth ward. That you can jump this distance with ease had already been proven by me. I took a running start for show, then jumped across to the fourth ward. The impact of landing reverberated through my legs just a bit, but it was not enough impact to really mind. Apparently the painkillers were working well.

The fourth ward. Where Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san and I had been imprisoned. Well even so, I felt like I had done Suzunashi-san wrong. Of course it was a given that my eyes would keep drifting to Kunagisa, but that person truly had nothing to do with any of this. There is a limit to how much one is allowed to drag other people into things, after all. Suzunashi-san is not as kind as Miiko-san, so I figured after all is said and done she would be lecturing me quite a bit. Oh well. I did not dislike being lectured. Especially if it came from Suzunashi-san.

And then from the fourth ward to the third ward, I jumped. This was three-and-a-half meters, so I had to be careful. On the flip side, it meant all you had to do was be careful.

The third ward. Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei's territory. I do not know how she felt on her end, but truthfully, I did not wish to see sensei ever again. I did not dislike her. I think. I just did not want to see her. Really, never again. Yet still, despite that, if she were not in this facility. If I think that way, this reunion had some meaning to it after all.

And then from the third ward to the second ward. Not even two meters. Like the jump from the fifth ward to the fourth ward, this was a casual distance.

This second ward – Koutari-san's research ward. Koutari Hinayoshi-san. I remembered that person. And then that conversation I heard through the wireless device between him and the *immoral* Neo Furuara-san. *That the Utsurigi Gaisuke death was a suicide.*"

"Well, if you call it a suicide there are few things more suicide than that suicide....."

I mumbled, but I did not think that to be the case. It may be, but it may also not be. It was all well either way. It was all bad either way. I think that

is still in the end just a matter of recognition of the action.

From the second ward to the first ward, not three meters.

What I remembered then was Hime-chan. That *self-described* apprentice of mine who I asked to take care of the rest.

Hime-chan would probably know how I felt. That girl that had a trace of Kunagisa in her, yet inwardly was closer to me. By chance, we met last month, and recently she moved into the first floor of the apartment I lived in. She hired me to be her tutor, but there has not been much progress on that front. There is nothing more difficult than trying to teach someone who hates studying. However, that is what I need to be doing from now on. What I need to do to Professor Shadou Kyouichirou was something like that. I stood on the rooftop of the first ward dominated by Professor Kyouichirou and thought those thoughts.

I changed the direction I faced, and then one-and-a-half meters to the sixth ward. This was not even a casual distance.

Having crossed that much, I gazed across the rooftop of the seventh ward. I could see the silhouettes of several people. These are all audiences and simultaneously the dramatis personae of this puppet show. Put another way, I must use my nonsense to stomp these people into the ground. Is that even possible? When I wondered that, I thought of that denim-coated person. *If that person was not around* pointed specifically at her. While we ended up parting ways, it was all my fault. In that case, the least I could do to take responsibility is to pay her back the best I can, probably.

Incidentally, with regards to that person named *Ishimaru Kouta*, I decided to act like she never existed. Shito-kun and Misachi-san had sighted her, so I could not hide her existence in this facility, but if I were to admit a connection to her, I would also be forced to admit Neo-san's background. I decided that would not be in our best interests, and because I fortunately had the lock-picking knife with me, I said that I had *escaped the cage on my own* and that I had *wandered around the rooftops of the facility*. Of course, this is quite a forced explanation, but an *intruder* was not good news to them either, so they were forced to swallow the ambiguity whole.

"This is the extremity of wanting ambiguity–" I said to myself self-deprecatingly. "– no, in this case, I am more wanting inconvenience."

From the sixth ward to the seventh ward, five meters. However, due to the shorter build of the seventh ward, it is more four-and-a-half meters.

Based on what Kunagisa said, the national average for long-jumping distance by high school boys is around that much. That made me feel a bit more relieved. Even if I had not done any proper exercise of late, I do not remember letting my body wither enough to lose to a seventeen-year-old boy. Maybe I simply lack the memory, but I have jumped this once. Even if I were self-absorbed at the time, there is no refuting that I had jumped the distance. Having succeeded once gave me a sense of comfort. I carefully gave myself a running start.

Running jumps are not simply a matter of using the leaping power of your legs, Kunagisa said. How well you can convert the momentum from the running start in midair into forward motion. Apparently it requires that sort of skill. Specifically, you need to reach top speed in the first half of the running start, and then you need to slowly shift your center of gravity to your upper body – or so Kunagisa had lectured me once on the techniques behind running jumps, but that is not the sort of thing you understand with your head. That motion that experts perform while *simply jumping* is not something that a newbie like myself can copy. That was why I also *simply jumped*.

I ran – and then I stepped.

And then my body levitated.

I heard a roar. Someone has raised their voice. Someone else did not. I had enough composure to think of such absent-minded things. The time until landing felt like forever. People say that when human beings feel their life at risk, they see everything around them in slow motion, and I felt like I was experiencing exactly that. Or perhaps I had not jumped far enough, and was simply plummeting to the ground. I did not care which, but at the same time I think that would not be good.

And, fortunately, I landed on the rooftop of the seventh ward. Or more accurately, I failed my landing, and had an unsightly tumble. I landed on the ground with my hurt left arm first, and while I did not lose consciousness, I hit my head a little, and then ended up writhing. It was a very uncool arrival scene.

"Whatcha doin'," said Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei with an exasperated voice as she walked to me. "Y'alright? And why're ya landing on the

worse-off half anyways?"

"I am alright – more importantly."

I took sensei's hand and was pulled to my feet. I saw everyone else over her shoulder. Professor Shadou Kyouichirou. Secretary Uze Misachi. Assistant Oogaki Shito. Research fellow Neo Furuara. Research fellow Koutari Hinayoshi. Research fellow Kasugai Kasuga. And then after a bit of space, Suzunashi Neon-san. And then, Kunagisa Tomo. Nine in all, ten including myself, were gathered on the rooftop of the seventh ward. Of course, I was the one that gathered everyone.

"– well, as you just saw," I stood up, and as I looked across at them I spread out my arms. I spread out my arms to prove that I was *safe*. "Like so, this seventh ward is accessible from every research ward by using the rooftops. Do you understand?"

"Hmph," said none other than Professor Kyouichirou with an agitated expression and speech mannerism, and of course he would. "How foolish. What a foolish story, greenhorn."

"Greenhorn. Harsh," I parried that without care. I have to deliberately cut off my emotional circuits now. "However unless you acknowledge reality, we cannot continue, Professor."

"Do you think such child's play – no, a trick that wouldn't even fool a child would affect me any? You can tell with one look. This seventh ward is shorter than the sixth ward. You've proven you can get here from there, but you can't prove the other way."

As expected of you, Professor. Unlike me, you notice that right away. It would have been simple if I could QED here, but of course that would not fly.

"Or do you plan to jump to the sixth ward?"

"No no..... that would be impossible. I think, anyways."

See? the Professor chuckled.

"What a waste of time. I'm quite the person to have taken the time for this."

Quite the person – indeed, that may be the case.

Even if it is simply because he is looking down on people, I cannot refute that being willing to tag along with this sort of thing makes Shadou Kyouichirou quite the person. To allow me – an enemy, to act so freely makes him without a doubt quite the person. As for myself, I apologize to

him in advance, but I will allow myself to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Well well, there is no need to rush to conclusions like that," I said. "Now – as the Professor says, you cannot return to the sixth ward from the seventh ward. Unless we are to assume that we have a world-class jumper among us. However, my actions just now have proven one thing. in short, *even if you cannot return, there is a route for infiltrating the seventh ward*."

"So what?" the Professor butted in. "If you cannot leave after entering, such a route holds no meaning. Do I need to remind you that even from the inside you must clear a multitude of locks, and even if you can clear those locks, you would still leave a record in the logs? That the door was opened from the inside. But nothing of the sort remained."

"Probably. Well, as you said," I care-freely agreed. "The double-layered security consisting of the locks and the log. We shall let that be the case."

"What? You make it sound like there's more to it. Are you saying that I, this Shadou Kyouichirou tampered with the logs? That I deleted entries?"

"Of course not. And you said you cannot do that anyways, did you not? Even if Kunagisa can do it, you cannot. Is that not right? Even if Kunagisa can do it. You said it yourself, Professor."

It was a bit of a mean way of saying things, and the Professor glared at me with quite a look. However, it seemed closer to bewilderment over the cards I had not yet shown as opposed to anger over my choice of wording.

"You–"

"To begin with–," I spoke over the Professor. "– it is too early to say that one *cannot return*. After all, there is no rule saying that you must clear the gap with only your body. For example, if you can use a rope, you can create a road to the sixth ward."

"You can. But that's if you have rope that can support the weight of a person. So, where would you find that?"

"Well, you would not find one in this facility..... but the rope is just an example. For example you could tie the clothing you wear into a rope, or use the OA transmission device cables and cords to try to twist one together."

"Do you think they would support human weight?"

"I do not," I looked away from the Professor – and faced Koutari-san. "However, if I were to borrow the Professor's favorite words–, as a

candidate for rope that can support human weight – what do you think of hair?"

Everyone looked at Koutari-san at once. However, Koutari-san simply adjusted the position of his sunglasses and remained silent. He opted to remain silent. I felt slightly exasperated at his stonewalled expression and continued.

"Koutari-san's hair used to be extremely long. If you put them together, perhaps it could create a bridge to the sixth ward – what do you think? Suzunashi-san?"

"..... hmm?" Suzunashi-san looked a bit startled. "My, you swung that to me? Well, right..... human hair is pretty sturdy. Although that depends on the person, too, but for example, I've seen Asano use that samurai ponytail to strangle someone."

"Yes. That is not a situation I would want to barge in on..... but if memory serves correct, one woman was said to have tested how much her long hair could carry, and it ended up being able to support over one ton," this was something I heard from Kunagisa. "That is an extreme example though and may not be the norm, but using hair is a plausible scenario. Or,"

This time I turned to Kasugai-san. Everyone followed suit.

Instead of a human, if you were to use an animal, it might be possible to leap this distance. Well, like so....." I raised my wrapped left arm for everyone to see. "It cannot be said impossible for that giant dog I fought to the death with earlier to be able to leap across this distance. What do you think, Kasugai-san?"

"Who knows. I've never tried it but it probably can," Kasugai-san tilted her head to the side but gave me an affirmative answer. "If that were the case from your perspective would that make me the suspect?"

"No, I have not said that much. All I am saying is that this seventh ward was not a sealed room at all, and that it was not completely closed off. I was just giving specific examples. Then what happens? At the very least, there is no longer a reason to suspect Kunagisa herself – or rather just the three of us–"

"An old trick," as expected, the Professor did not bat an eye at this so far. And with a chortling tone, he stared at me. "**Cobbling together** extreme and memorable theories and using the impact to try to make it sound like the truth has been revealed. The stunt to run and jump to this seventh ward

was for this, wasn't it? A pretty typical scam artist's method. I'm not biting, greenhorn."

"Cobbled together?"

"Yeah. It's obviously if you think about it. Both of those examples can be broken with just a bit of thought. Koutari's hair was long but it was still only a meter at best. If you were to wind that together into a rope, factoring durability, it would go four meters at best. Not enough to go from the seventh ward to the sixth ward. And the animal suspect theory is a joke. How does a mere dog stab a person, crucify them to the wall, and write letters in blood?"

"Who knows – maybe someone was riding on the back of the dog?"

"I think that would be taking it too far," Kasugai-san interceded on my joke. She might surprisingly be a good person, after all. "Impossible to jump that while carrying a person."

"..... well, thank you," I bowed my head. "I am grateful for the information."

"So? What? Greenhorn. Are those the cards you brought?"

"So then – how about this, for example? Let us think about the reason for Utsurigi Gaisuke having been dismembered that way. Why was Utsurigi's stomach cut open? What if it was a means for **pulling out his internal organs**?"

I asked, while I motioned extravagantly like an actor on a stage. I felt like I was acting too much, like Neo-san, but there is no such thing as too much in a case like this.

"Pulling out the internal organs–" sensei asked, mystified. "Whatcha mean?"

"They say the human digestive tract is like one long tube. One tube connecting the mouth to the waste output. And this tube made from meat has a good amount of elasticity, and as a result a certain level of strength. For example **to use that as a rope**–"

"Huh? Wait," sensei stopped me. "Utsurigi-san's internal organs were all right inside. I dissected his intestine an' liver an' all."

"Exactly. As such, this, too, was just a theory," I raised my palms. "Truth be the told, it is probably impossible to use the digestive tract as a rope..... that was a pretty crude type of joke. You know, lip service. But still, I do not think it a bad idea to assume that there was some sort of deliberateness to

Utsurigi-san's body itself. I do not intend at all for a greenhorn like myself to host a mystery-solving conference right here and now..... but do you not think there is something to the rather absurd method of Utsurigi Gaisuke's death?"

"What're you getting at," the Professor said, irritated. "The way you talk is roundabout. Too roundabout. What're you trying to say, if you have something to say, just spit it out, like a man."

"Like a man. Well, I do not mind....." I shrugged my shoulders. Roundabout. However, that could not be helped, because there was something I needed to skirt around. "However, if you think about it, the Professor's theories were not particularly manly, either. *Kunagisa Tomo should have been able to do it*..... that was pretty forced. And, even if it were possible for Kunagisa, in the end – that does not in any way mean that any of you could not have done it also. You just needed to say *I cannot do it.*"

"..... is that your solution?"

"No, this was just faultfinding. There is no deep meaning to it. At this point."

The Professor looked at this half-assed conversation involving the giving and withdrawing of theories with a disapproving look, but this time he remained silent. In the end, that was what I was hoping for. At the end of the end of the end, I wanted to create a smoke screen. After creating a mirage to the best of abilities, to create anxiety in the Professor – and everyone else. To fluster them. In other words, to rattle their thinking. In other words, to avoid standing on the same ground as them.

This is the exact opposite methodology of *Mankind's Strongest Contractor*, but for the weakest like myself, this is probably the only strategy capable of overcoming *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou.

"Sensei," I turned to Kokoromi-sensei and asked. "In any case, could you tell us the results of the autopsy on Utsurigi-san?"

"Mm? Ahh. Umm. Time a death was roughly 1AM. Cause a death'd be the scissors piercin' his eye and reachin' the brain. The stomach and all that other stuff came after. Arms cut off even later, and crucified after that. Well, that'd be the gist of it."

I had heard this already in the third ward, but that reality needed to be kept under wraps. Sensei of course understood that, and naturally reported, including everyone else. Despite it not really being the case, I felt

like we had become accomplices. Although this was still probably not a case of trust.

"What bothers me, y'know, would be that time lag before cuttin' off the arms. Like three or four hours after he died. Can't imagine it'd take that long, so–"

"Hey, you're talking too much, Miyoshi," the Professor said, as if scolding sensei. "I don't care if you're an old acquaintance of his, I won't allow you to back that any more than necessary."

"Backing him eh," Kokoromi-sensei sarcastically laughed at the Professor. "Roger dodger. I'll hold off on doin' anythin' much. So, whatcha meanin' to do with Utsurigi-san's autopsy, my student?"

"**Whatcha meanin' to do**? However, sensei, would it not take a lot of stamina to destroy a human body to that degree, and then crucify them?"

"Are you trying to say that the Lady of Kunagisa cannot do so with her thin arms?" it was Professor Kyouichirou who answered, perhaps in an effort to prevent sensei from speaking any more. "Hah. I'd prefer if you stopped trying to find fault with everything. The Lady of Kunagisa doesn't need to be the one who did everything. After all, the Lady of Kunagisa simply needs to open the door. The rest – **you** could do."

"As you say. I have not a word of retort," I did not respond to the Professor's taunt. That time – this morning, that I became enraged at the Professor's taunt was my big failing. I will not step on the same landmine twice. If possible, anyways. "However, in that case, the question still remains unanswered as to why Utsurigi Gaisuke's body needed to be dismembered to such an extent."

"Are you saying you have the answer to that?"

"I shall answer that at a later time. Now, there is no point in taking up too much time and it will simply become a drag, so allow me to bring us into the solution arc. Truthfully – unfortunately and helplessly truthfully, not only with regards to this seventh ward, but every building in this facility has so few points of entry that they can each be called indomitable fortresses. No windows – while this cannot be helped, there is only one entrance. And that one entrance has the Kunagisa Tomo-made security lock. Well, not bothering with the lock itself, that means the only openings are this rooftop and the entrance. Forgive me if I call it a skyward tunnel. Professor Kyouichirou determined that the suspect who killed Utsurigi-

san entered and left through that entrance," I glanced at Professor Kyouichirou. That would indeed imply that the suspects are Kunagisa Tomo and her acquaintances. However, as one of them, I cannot accept that theory. The Professor may simply call it *a prepared agreement among accomplices* but I can vouch for Kunagisa's innocence. Or rather, I know of Kunagisa Tomo's innocence. As a result, I would say the entrance was not used."

"So ya'd say the rooftop route's th'only option?"

"Miyoshi!" the Professor shouted. "Cut that out! You've been acting out of line!"

"Well m'bad. Guess ya didn't call."

Sensei bowed her head. As someone who already decided to cut ties with the Professor, it probably suits her better for my little puppet show to succeed. In that sense, perhaps sensei and I could truly be called accomplices. I think.

"Well, that is what I am saying. However – this has quite a few restrictions," I turned toward the sixth ward from whence I came, and said, mumbling. "Do you know what the restriction is on this rooftop route?"

This question that I posed to no one in particular received no response. And after a while, the Professor said irritably, "We've already established that it's a one-way street."

"You can get here but you can't go bac–"

"No, well, that is true. Indeed, you cannot go back – but if you think about it, *coming* is pretty difficult, too."

"– what?"

From the fifth ward to the first ward, and from there to the sixth ward, well, the longest distance was about three-and-a-half meters, so anyone here would be able to make that jump – but not *anyone* would be able to make this last jump–"

Five meters – which really ends up being more like four-and-a-half meters. Rivaling the national average of high school boys– however, it being the average means that there is some scatter. It absolutely does not mean that it is the minimal line that everyone can overcome. In fact, it actually means that around half actually cannot clear this jump.

In other words, **there are those that can clear and those that cannot clear** these four-and-a-half meters–

"As you can see, I was able to jump. Despite how I may look, a long time ago – or rather, well, I shall spill the beans because everyone already knows, but five years ago I participated as an abroad student in the ER program male youth development engine under the ER3 System research group. I trained my body a bit while I was there, and as a result – I have above-average athleticism even now."

Although I am gradually losing it all, I added as a joke.

"Umm. Sorry, Suzunashi-san," I asked Suzunashi-san again. "Do you think you could jump this distance?"

"I probably can," this time she may have expected the question, as Suzunashi-san immediately answered. "I've never really measured it, but five meters should be a cinch. Maybe six meters – might be impossible. Something like that."

"Is that so."

Even for someone unfamiliar with long-jumping, Suzunashi-san's extraordinary height, leg length, and her strength meant that her answer did not surprise anyone. Most probably figured she could jump further than me. I nodded lightly, and then turned to Kunagisa.

"Tomo, you?"

"Uuuh. Impossible," Kunagisa pursed her lips and answered unhappily. Not that there was any point in asking her. "I might not make one meter."

This, too, was expected. Kunagisa is a small girl who skips meals, eats unhealthy, and coops up, so she is as distant as can be from muscles and leg strength. I turned to the Professor and said, "as you heard."

"Even among the three of us, there is a bit of scatter. That said, if we assume the *rooftop route* was taken, then our innocence is proven. After all, you cannot use this route without **starting from one of the research wards**. As long as every building has been securely locked, we cannot enter the premises."

"Are you saying the suspect is one of us?"

The Professor glared at me.

"That is what I have been saying, is it not?"

I answered solemnly.

"Who? Give me the name."

“I am getting there. Oh please, why the hurry? This is **the end**, so let us enjoy the ride. – now, who cannot use this rooftop route? Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, secretary Uze Misachi, assistant Oogaki Shito, Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei, research fellow Neo Furuara, research fellow Koutari Hinayoshi, research fellow Kasugai Kasuga–” I said one name at a time, as if interrogating them. This was the start of the climax. ”– first, we can remove the three women. In other words, sensei, Kasugai-san, and Misachi-san.”

”—-” ”.....” ”.....”

The three of them responded with silence.

“This is a simple matter of build..... all three are rather small. And, I am not wishing to discriminate based on gender, but there is also the problem of fundamental athletic capabilities. It is much too risky too attempt this acrobatic feat as a woman.”

I feel like I could sense Suzunashi-san’s glare from my right, but I chose to ignore it. You cannot call yourself wise by being afraid of what will happen in the future. I think, but I am definitely being glared at. Hang in there, this is a serious situation. I shook my head slightly, and then said, “To continue.”

“I think it is impossible for Neo-san, too. From a physical build perspective.” Umm. How should I put it. In other words. “Because he has a more rotund shape than is the norm.....”

“Well, probably,” Neo-san slapped his belly while roaring with laughter. “I’d be trying to jump that while carrying an extra 20 kilograms. I probably wouldn’t make it. That strikes me off the list of suspects I suppose.”

”..... that leaves three. Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, assistant Oogaki Shito, research fellow Koutari Hinayoshi. ..... of these, the one we can remove would be of course yourself, Professor.”

”..... why?”

“Well, if you want to say you can clear the jump, I do not mind, but the Professor is quite senior. Sixty-three..... I do think this would be quite tough.”

The Professor said nothing. But there was no need to wait for an answer. based on common sense, anyone could tell that it would be impossible for the Professor to jump that distance.

“And so that leaves two.”

Koutari-san, and Shito-kun.

Everyone looked at the two.

"These two are able to use the rooftop route – in other words, in Shito-kun's case, from the first ward to the sixth ward and then to the seventh ward. In Koutari-san's case the second ward, first ward, sixth ward, and then the seventh ward, in that order–"

I observed the two as I spoke, but as before, Koutari-san seemed to show no signs of reaction, instead fixating on the position of his sunglasses. Calmness was his attitude. However, that was not the case with Shito-kun. His face was flushed red with anger, and he shouted at me.

"– hey! You! I shut up and listen and all I get is this ridiculou-"

"I am sorry but this is not the time for me to be dealing with your little jabs. Will you just stay quiet and listen?"

"The fuck? You–"

"Calm down. **You too** cannot use this route, after all," I raised one hand to stop the enraged Shito-kun, and continued speaking in a solemn tone. "You have a **vision** problem."

"– wha," Shito-kun froze at the word *vision*. "-t did you just say?"

"I said vision... you cannot see well, can you? With those eyes," I said deliberately, as if that were an obvious, known fact. "It does not appear to be an issue with the lenses of your eyeball nor your glasses..... so it might be a problem with your nervous system? I am not sure because I was not very good with anatomy."

Everyone suddenly piped up. Those that knew began speaking to me, and those that did not began questioning Shito-kun, and everyone glanced about. In terms of insiders, Misachi-san and Kasugai-san did not seem to know. For the outsiders, Suzunashi-san seemed not to have noticed, while Kunagisa seemed to have noticed. Well, with Kunagisa's observation skills it was not out of the question.

"You..... how did you–"

"Just a hunch, that is all."

For example, when we first met, he had to come ridiculously close to confirm me, or that he had to confirm Kunagisa by touching her hands, or that he could not tell whether the tall Suzunashi-san was a man or woman. Or for example when Kouta-san and I were hiding behind the water supply tank, a person with normal vision would not have been able to find us out,

especially considering that he was again unable to determine the gender of the tall Kouta-san. And then the reason that Kouta-san continually aimed not for his head but his stomach. All of that together gave me a *hunch*.

"Am I wrong?"

"– you're not, but....."

The loss of vision due to an abnormal nervous system. Whether that was priori or posteriori I could not tell, but regardless of which, or perhaps a result of the Professor's *human experiments*, mattered not to me. Irrelevant. In other words, Shito-kun could only see landscape and people in **cloudy** fashion. While his ability to walk about the facility without any problems meant that he was not completely blind, that still meant.....

"Then we can say that it is impossible for you to jump this distance."

"H- hey. You're right about me..... but that means," Shito-kun suppressed his anger, but this time said with a flustered tone. "That means there's only one–"

"Exactly. There is one. Koutari-san," I pointed at Koutari-san. "– in Koutari-san's case – well, how about his case? The problems of gender, build, age, senses, or perhaps a like reason–"

Koutari-san. Did not. React. Did not glare. Did not react. Did not even change how he breathed.

"– there are **none**."

I was not the one who abruptly said that.

It was Koutari-san himself.

"Indeed, there are no reasons for me."

"– Koutari!" the Professor shouted. "What're you saying! You–"

"Calm down," Koutari-san said curtly, with a solemn tone that matcedh mine. "Professor. It is simply a discussion of whether I can cross this. At this point. Isn't that right, Mr. Lover?"

Mr. Lover. I trembled, at that nickname, which was far too sharp to be used so calmly in this situation. In other words. Kunagisa Tomo's.

Koutari-san and I stood roughly five meters apart, physically – no, more like six meters. Perhaps I should be just a bit closer. I thought, as I took just one step toward Koutari-san. And then I faced him.

From here – my opponent is Koutari Hinayoshi.

From here, my opponent is Koutari Hinayoshi.

"Or are you saying that I'm the suspect, Mr. Lover?"

He said, like a suspect.

"Yes. You are the suspect, Koutari-san."

I answered, like a detective.

I could hear the Professor shouting, but I ignored it. I took on emore step toward Koutari-san. There would be no point in getting any closer. The physical distance between us was about four-and-a-half meters – around this should be perfect.

"– interesting. If you're saying I'm the suspect, then very well, prove it, Mr. Lover," Koutari-san said without changing his expression. "Indeed, I'm the only one who can use this route. After all, my name is *God's Legs* [1]. However, as the Professor has stated, and as you have agreed, there is no way of returning."

"No way of returning–" I repeated his words. "– but that assumes there is a need to return."

"....."

Koutari-san did not respond.

"..... no, there is a need to return, of course. Otherwise the log kept in the central computer would no longer match. Theoretically, you cannot use the means of remaining here after killing Utsurigi-san, and then waiting for Shito-kun's arrival and leaving through the entrance. The doors autolock, so you must leave immediately after it has opened, and in that case it would be difficult to leave without Shito-kun noticing. Even if you remain out of his sight, Shito-kun would notice," like when he discovered Kouta-san and I. "Theoretically, even if you could fortunately escape from the seventh ward, this time you cannot enter the second ward. You could, but then it would show up in the log."

"I'm tired of your pointless theories," the Professor said this time not out of anger but out of true exhaustion. "Cut it out. We don't have time to be dealing with your nonsense anymo–"

"Unfortunately, just as you are the *Mad Demon*, I am the user of nonsense. However, do not worry, we are almost at the end. The final stop is right ahead," I said only that much to the Professor, and then turned to face Koutari-san again. "Now, we shall backtrack a bit – but why did you need to destroy Utsurigi Gaisuke's body so much? Hatred? Wanting to dominate? A ritual? Well, it does not matter. However, there is just one thing that sticks out – why did the suspect take Utsurigi Gaisuke's arms?"

Koutari-san did not answer, unemotional.

"Perhaps they wanted the *arms* of a once and former cyber-terrorist – literally, the *arms*. However this romantic thought is a bit of a forced issue..... the first thing I thought of was to eradicate evidence that could have emerged through a cadaveric spasm. A cadaveric spasm–" I shot sensei a glance. "– a phenomenon that occurs when a life form is violently and abruptly killed. When the victim grabs something before being killed, their hands freeze in position. In other words, if the victim grabbed the button of the suspect or their nametag, it would become undeniable proof, and so the suspect would need to get rid of it."

"So there was absolute proof in Utsurigi-san's hands?" Suzunashi-san asked me. "But then you would just need to cut the hands off from the wrists. You could cut off the fingers too and make the item drop out. You know, Inoji, I've just about had enough, too, so can you make it easier to get?"

"Sorry," I apologized to Suzunashi-san. How unsightly. "Umm. Well, why they did not cut off the wrists or slice off the fingers was because if you did that, it would be obviously that it was an act to *remove evidence grabbed through a cadaveric spasm*. If you cut the arms off at the shoulder it would cover that up–... or at least be able to muddle the picture– or so I once thought, but."

"But?"

"If you think about it..... Utsurigi-san's cause of death was being stabbed in the eye with a scissors, Suzunashi-san. That means none of this would make sense."

"Why? It's a plenty violent death, I think."

"I thought so, too, and that's true, but..... in terms of problems, like, if someone is **driving the blades of a scissors toward your eye from in front**," I made a scissors with my fingers and pointed to my eyes. "In the face of such danger, no human would try to grab the button of a shirt or a nametag on the lab coat or something like that....."

"Ahh... well of course," Suzunashi-san nodded. You would first grip **the opponent's arms**, to protect yourself. Hmm..... well now that you put it that way, that's true, but then why would the arms have cut off?"

"That is not the only problem. As sensei said earlier, why the arms were cut off some hours after death. Well, the answer to this one can be figured

out quickly. This is simply because they were **waiting for it to stop raining**."

"– rain?"

"Rain. This rooftop route is already difficult to return through, yet it was raining heavily last night," Kouta-san said the arms had been cut off some hours after death, and so it was raining, but that means the reverse could also be implied. Basically, **because it was raining**, the arms were cut off a few hours later. "In truth, it had stopped raining by sunrise, but – yes, truth be told, you should not have executed that murder when it was going to rain that night. Am I wrong, Koutari-san?"

"Who knows," Koutari-san answered with a low tone. "I don't know what you mean."

"– however, there was a reason you had to execute it then. Because you did not know **when** the three of us intended to leave. If you had let last night's opportunity go and we had gone home today – you would lose the scapegoats **for framing the murder**."

"....."

"Fortunately, it stopped raining. So all you had to do was go back."

"That's why! We've been asking how he can return!"

Finally, the Professor lost control of himself and threw his cane at me. It seems he had reached his irritability limit. The wooden cane struck my left arm, right above the bandage. It did not hurt because of the pain killer, but I could still feel the impact, and I took two, three steps back. Maybe that really broke my bone.

As Suzunashi-san had done this morning, I simply glared at the Professor in silence.

"– what. Why're you looking at me. With those – with those– eyes," I did not throw anything but, however, the Professor took a few steps back. And then he ran into Misachi-san, and stopped. "Those eyes, like his, a brat like you, at me."

Him? Who? Not Suzunashi-san. Perhaps Utsurigi. Or perhaps the young Kunagisa Tomo or Nao-san. I did not know. I did not care to know. Well, whoever.

"– when you look from over there," I spoke. "It is actually hard to notice. That it is a one-way route, because you can come here but that you cannot go back. For example, if Koutari-san – no, let us keep it undecided,

if the suspect jumped across and for the first time realized they could not return. Then how can they return? Simple. They just need to use rope."

"..... I said! There is nothing of the–"

"I said earlier, did I not? That Koutari-san can use his long hair as rope."

"And I said earlier, too! There is not enough leng–"

"**If there is not enough, then add to it**. For example–

– using Utsurigi Gaisuke's arms."

No one had the gall to intercede this time. Presumably no one had expected those words – no. Just one person, one human being had expected those words. I faced that person.

I faced Koutari Hinayoshi.

"On the ends of the rope of hair you created, you tied the right arm and the left arm. I do not know the average length of an adult male arm – but for example, if you were to use my arms, you would get sixty to seventy centimeters. With both arms, you would get about – a meter thirty. If you add hair to that, you can reach the sixth ward. Human limbs – can obviously support human weight. Is that not right, Koutari-san?" Koutari-san did not answer, and simply adjusted his sunglasses. I continued. "Rope – or perhaps something of the sort. There is however a problem to using such a thing – in other words, how you hook the rope to the rooftop of the sixth ward considering there is no fencing. However, if you attach Utsurigi's arm to the end of the rope – you can clear that hurdle. **The shape of Utsurigi's hands having grabbed your arms under cadaveric spasm** would look just like a fishing hook. It is perfect for attaching to the drainage at the edge of the roof–"

"– enough nonsense!"

The Professor. *Mad Demon* Professor Shadou Kyouichirou stomped his feet and shouted so loud that he began panting afterwards. Misachi-san

tried to hold him back, but he tossed her aside. “Do you think that unrealistic – incoherent – cobbled together – far-fetched thing will fly!?”

“Unrealistic? Incoherent? Cobbled together? Far-fetched? Of course!” I looked at the Professor and shouted back. “However, Professor, considering this is a case that involves none other than yourself Shadou Kyouichirou, Utsurigi Gaisuke, and Kunagisa Tomo, how could you expect the solution to be anything but unrealistic and incoherent and cobbled together and far-fetched, and insane and reasonable? This is the one truth within this facility!”

“How idiotic... you scum! Do you think that’s possible!?”

“The problem is not whether **it happened or not**. The problem is also not whether **it did not happen**. The action is not the problem. The problem is whether there is recognition! Am I wrong! Koutari-san!”

“Sh- shut up!” the Professor’s face contorted with anger. It became red, and then bluish-white. “Ko..... Koutari! Say something! To this messed up brat–”

”.....”

Koutari-san did not respond to even those words from the Professor. And then, raising his chin just a bit, he said to me.

”..... proof? That I did such a thing.”

“Proof..... well, you cutting your hair would not suffice as proof, but–” I pointed at Koutari-san. “If I am largely correct, then on one of your arms there should be a hand-print left by Utsurigi-san due to his cadaveric spasm.”

”.....”

“Koutari!”

The Professor shouted again.

“Tell him he’s wrong! Roll up your sleeves and show him you’re innocent! And then we’ll never let this brat out of the cage again! We’ll lock him up in the basement of the basement, and then thoroughly, thoroughly, thoroughly–”

”– well, I’ll give you a sixty.”

Koutari-san switched from his low tone and spoke with a much lighter tone.

“Kouta–”

“Sixty. I underestimated you. It was too clumsily done, and it took you far too much time.”

”– why, thank you,” I shrugged. ”– even so, that is a passing grade.”

I said with a hushed voice.

And then Koutari-san laughed.

It was a laugh filled with composure, a laugh that revealed his complete lack of care.

As if he were laughing at my antics.

Antics.

In the end, that was all it was. From start to finish, I had been dancing on the palm of this man. From start to finish – truly, from start to finish. From the absolute beginning, to this pre-established harmonic end. To the end of the end of the end.

“W– why!” Shito-kun was the one who shouted. “Why, why would you – what reason would you have for killing Utsurigi-san–”

“Reason? I see. A reason.”

Koutari-san put his arms under his white lab coat while looking like he was thinking. And then.

“However, don’t you think there’s no need for a reason?”

”– what are you saying–” Shito-kun’s ovice trembled. “Killing someone with a reason – killing someone without a motive.....”

That.

Is that something that cannot be?

A murder without reason.

A murder without conviction.

Of course it cannot be.

If so.

“Then can you kill someone if you have a reason?”

”..... Koutari-san.”

“Just kidding.”

Koutari-san cackled. It was a cold laugh.

As if he were looking at a clueless child.

A sympathizing supremacy.

A mourning disdain.

That was how Koutari-san seemed as he looked at Shito-kun.

“Of course, I’m kidding.”

The arms under his white lab coat seemed to have grabbed something.

“You know. Because you can’t call this a murder case without motive–!”

And then he swiftly pulled out his arms – and threw the knives held between his fingers. All three of the three knives he flung stabbed my left arm through the bandages. I flew back from the impact and fell. I fell down back first. Air was knocked out of my lungs and I momentarily struggled to breath. And then a moment later, my head hit the ground.

For just one moment, everyone looked at me as I lay fallen. And it took another moment for them to look back at Koutari-san.

Combined, two moments.

That was enough.

Bam, the sound of the door being shut.

By the time everyone had turned back, the sight nor shadow nor shape of Koutari Hinayoshi could no longer be found.

Suddenly, he disappeared.

As if.

As if such a character had never existed from the start.

”– that bastard! What the fuck! Shit! Shit!” Shito-kun ran toward the door after Koutari-san. ”– Not getting away!”

“Give it up, Shito-kun,” I said while still sprawled on my back, and with a lackadaisical tone even by my standards, spoke to Shito-kun. “Chasing him would be a waste of effort.”

”– ah?” Shito-kun turned around with furrowed brows. “What do you mean–”

“Exactly what I said. You cannot catch Koutari-san now.”

Yes. Probably cannot catch him. After all, you could figure as much given that he showed up to this solution arc full of confidence. He had already gotten ahold of some sort of escape route – and an absolutely guaranteed

escape route, at that. One that would let him escape from us, and the police. Although I did not know what that means was, exactly.

That was fine.

I did not think of wanting to catch him, anyways. What was important was that Kunagisa Tomo's innocence was proven. And that I had carried that out. Then that was enough. Other people would take care of the left. None of that was our business.

"And – Shito-kun. I think you have other business to take care of."

I sat up, and then pulled out the knives stuck through the bandages one at a time. Given the lack of bleeding I was not particularly hurt. It was probably only enough to pierce one layer of skin. The bandages had acted as a defensive wall. And just a single layer of skin being breached was not enough, thanks to the painkillers, to make me feel any pain, although now I was truly afraid of when the painkillers cut out. Would my left arm ever be usable again?

However – these three knives. If I did not protect myself with my arm, they would have struck my heart. Did he figure I would protect myself? Or did he figure it would be alright to kill me? It was not even worth thinking about, because it was almost certainly the latter.

He has a reason for wanting to kill me.

And I have a reason for being killed by him.

I finished pulling out the knives, and then with my left arm.

– pointed at Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

"Shito-kun. Your job is to be his assistant, is it not?" I tried to be careful of sounding too cold, but I still ended up speaking with a stoic voice. "You have to fulfill that to the end."

"– Professor."

Shito-kun said with an exasperated tone.

There, dumbfounded. Dumbfounded, and slumped on the ground, was one old man. Facing the door that Koutari-san had run through, with his eyes open and unblinking, jaw agape.

Like he would topple over with a push.

Like he would crumble apart with a poke.

Just the silhouette of one small old man.

An old professor that lost Utsurigi Gaisuke, and could not get ahold of Kunagisa Tomo.

That lost his one goal.

That lost his irreplaceable hope.

So this is what happens to a human being that has lost everything.

Mad Demon.

This was truly, in the truest meaning.

"Genuinely, un-inflated nonsense."

I sighed, facing up.

I see – this was truly malignant bacteria. Expands and expands, and you cannot hope to contain it. If this was the result because Professor Kyouichirou had tried to capture *Cluster*'s cracker Utsurigi Gaisuke, because he had tried to corral him in his hands – if Utsurigi Gaisuke was such that he could not be corralled by a genius such as Shadou Kyouichirou – then what exactly could be corralled in the hand of such a dwarf as I?

"Ii-chan."

Something grabbed my right hand.

It was Kunagisa.

The blue-colored.

Girl that I know very well.

"So, since you're done and everything's over, can we go home?"

Done. Over.

What exactly is done and which was over that she was referring to?

I do not know.

I do not know.

What I know is just one thing.

This, Kunagisa Tomo.

"Uni? What's up, Ii-chan? You don't wanna go home?"

I could see Suzunashi-san past Kunagisa. She was about to light a cigarette. Our eyes met for just a moment, but she disregarded that, and simply looked up at the sky.

"..... right."

Right.

Over, and done with.

There is nothing I need to do after this.

There is nothing I need to do after that.

There is nothing I need to do after the fact.

Now, simply, I can freely flow along.

So.
So, lets go home.
“Lets go home, Tomo.”
However.
Where exactly am I trying to go home to?

[1)] 神 god 足 leg

哀川潤
AIKAWA JYUN
請負人。
後日談――負け犬達の沈黙
ぼく（語り部）
十九歳。

Afterwards

Silence of the Losers

Utsurigi Gaisuke, *Criminal Judge* Green Green Green (Malignant Bacteria).
Hinemosu Suzu, *Consigned Stillness* Double Flick (Double-layered World).
Gotodoroki Seigo, *Scornful Compatriot* Reverse Cross (Night-travel Crime).
Munefuyumu Tsuki, *Clamoring Bloodshot Eyes* Cubic Loop (Infinite Three-dimension).
Nadekiri Hakuraku, *Disheartened Parting Gift* Dancing with Madness (Dancing Wildly).
Ayanami Hyou, *Spinning Suzuki* Cheetah (Wild Beast).
Shikigishi Kishiki, *Squirming Ruination* Bad Kind (City).
Shigai Touno, *Resurrecting Debasement* Trigger-happy End (Corpse).
Kunagisa Tomo, *Walking Wrath* Dead Blue (Blue Verge of Death).

Not so much an epilogue so much as the behind-the-scenes that must never be spoken about.

As for where I return, for now the only place for me to return to is that apartment in Kyoto. That night – after having wrapped everything up, without waiting for nightfall, we left the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility using the Fiat we refueled with Shito-kun's help. Suzunashi-san reserved a hotel while in the car, and we spent the night in Nagoya. While it was an inn we settled on at the last minute, it boasted an enormous room and top-notch service – well, not that much, but it was still much better than the *Haunted House* in the research facility. The three of us slept like

corpses in the same bed (Me → Kunagisa → Suzunashi-san). Well, we did not really, but it definitely felt like it had been a while since I had slept.

When the sun rose, Suzunashi-san's lecturing began. It lasted several hours, and I sat in seiza[1)] posture the entire time in silence without being allowed to talk back, sometimes having my head bopped while she vented her anger. While that happened, Kunagisa woke up, and we spent the entire day touring Nagoya. While keeping watch over Kunagisa, who ran around like a child, I bought the uirō Hime-chan had requested of me (conveniently, there was a five-color set, immediate buy) as well as some for Miiko-san and the others in the apartment, for a total of ten bars.

On the way home that evening, we dropped off Suzunashi-san in the Hiei mountain range in Higa Prefecture.

"Well, give Asano my regards. We'll continue the lecture another day."

So she said. Apparently she was still not through. Part of me felt exasperated, but the other part of me looked forward to it.

And then I stopped the car in the high-end residential area Shirosaki that Kyoto boasted to the rest of country (or perhaps more accurately *felt embarrassed about*), or more specifically in front of the most flamboyant mansion in town that Kunagisa lived in, and helped her to her room.

"Well, later." "Yup, later."

I did not know what she meant by *later* but I returned her greeting, returned to the Fiat, and then this time headed for the apartment in which I live. I parked the Fiat in the parking lot, and then less than a minute of walking. I entered the apartment, and before heading to my room, knocked on the door to the room next door.

"Yo, welcome home," Miiko-san was fortunately home, and with she welcomed me with her usual, unkempt sight. It seemed she had downed a little, no, quite a bit of sake, and her face was red. "That was fast. Two days three nights."

"Two days three nights....."

Indeed. The three of us had only been in that facility for two days. Yet look at us, it felt like we had been imprisoned for a whole month.

"Well, yes. Thank you for letting me borrow your car. Here is the key. And money for gasoline..... also, a souvenir, uirō."

"Right... hmm?" Miiko-san noticed my left arm. It had been re-patched by Kokoromi-sensei, and was now covered in a cast instead of just

bandages. ”..... Inoji, did you drive from Nagoya to here with that arm?”

“Huh. Well, yes, see, my fingers move. And I use my right hand for the transmission.”

“I see..... well, that’s alright then.”

Miiko-san stopped asking questions then, and did not ask about what happened to my arm.

“Come in. Let’s eat uirō. These things taste better eating together with you.”

“Usually you’re supposed to decline, but.....”

But, even I struggled to turn down this nostalgic sense of human decency.

“I shall accept today, Miiko-san.”

“Mmhmm. C’mon c’mon, get closer.”

And so in that way I ate uirō and drank tea in Miiko-san’s room – and while it was quite a hassle to deal with a drunk Miiko-san – I then returned to my room. There was nothing in it.

”..... huh?”

Wait, wait, while it was normal for there to be no furniture, my clothing and my books being nonexistent was not. I did not see my cell phone nor its charger, either. Woah, even my health insurance card and my accounting book are gone. For a moment I was in a bit of a rush thinking I had been robbed, but the next moment I realized what had happened, and headed to Hime-chan’s room on the first floor.

“Because you said you’d give me everything, Master.”

The suspect was Hime-chan.

“Hime-chan cleaned your room. Even threw away your trash.”

There was no doubting that the *trash* Hime-chan referred to included my living items.

”..... Hime-chan. That was supposed to be if I did not return safely.....”

“But. But but, looking at your arm, Master, you didn’t get back safely.”

”..... maybe.”

Jeez..... if every case could be solved so easily.

I took back my accounting book and health insurance card from Hime-chan, gave her the uirō in exchange, and then returned to my room once more.

“Ahh..... you know.”

As if I had awakened from nihility. As if I had awakened from a nightmare. That is, of course, nothing but misapprehension similar to a delusion. Because the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility was indeed real.

"Real – how is that any different from an illusion?"

What will happen to that research facility now? I thought about that at length. With its leader Professor Shadou Kyouichirou in such a state, it probably does not function as a research facility anymore, so it may have already been absorbed into another research syndicate, is what Kunagisa had told me. Indeed, it no longer held any meaning – literally – and I could not imagine the Kunagisa household pouring money into the *Mad Demon* forever. So then what would happen to the other researchers.

Neo-san would not be troubled. He was a turncoat from the start. His profession is betrayal – an immoral who lived on the extreme in terms of not belonging anywhere. He would just return payment equating to the aspects of his job he was unable to fulfill, and as a professional traitor, move on to his next *job*.

"– but you know. I want to try working as a pair with you once. I actually want to recruit you and take you along here and now."

"That is not a funny joke..... please do not say something like *you seem well-suited to betraying*."

"Naw, you're not the type to betray people. If anything you're more the type to abandon them in their face."

"....."

"Hmm? That was supposed to be a laughable joke."

– although we would likely never cross paths again, much less have any run-ins with each other, in retrospect, it is fascinating to realize that I had found him a very amusing fellow. There are not many who have defined so clearly what it means to *betray*.

Miyoshi Kokoromi – Kokoromi-sensei said she would return to the ER3 System again. Well, I do not imagine they have any reason to reject someone of her talents, so all should be well on her end.

"Well, we shall not meet again, sensei."

"Mmm. Y'sure? I think we'll meet again soon, y'know."

"....."

“And y’know, it’ll be in an even more, more and more ridiculous and terrible a situation, but it’d sure fit ya fine. So, y’know, adios!”

Sensei left an ominous prediction for me yet again. Jeez, why is that person so bad at parting scenes? Cut me some slack, seriously.

Kasugai Kasuga. Kasugai-san – what is that person doing? She will do anything, to the point where I should really not be paying it any heed. In the truest meaning of the phrase, she will do anything. Of all people, I cannot imagine her ever being in a situation where she cannot find a way out. A human being that has nothing from the start except *talent*. There is nothing she wants and nothing she does not want, no satisfaction nor dissatisfaction, no fortune nor misfortune, nothing to protect and no idea what it means to want to destroy, not alive and thus no concept of death, has values but no sense of valuation, no problems and no solutions – that is the sort of person she is.

If I may allow one prediction, I think she will end up being pulled into some part of the Kunagisa Syndicate. Because she is too talented as a scientist to be allowed to roam free. She, too, was someone I expected never to run into again, but - no, specifically for her, there are no buts.

Oogaki Shito – Uze Misachi. The two of them said they would tag along with Shadou Kyouichirou. Follow him wherever, forever. I did not say anything. There was nothing to say. There is nothing a person with no convictions can say to people with strong convictions.

And then.

Koutari Hinayoshi.

Koutari Hinayoshi – escaped.

The security guards standing guard over the foothills were said never to have seen him. Truly, like smoke, he disappeared like a puff of cloud.

“Disappear – although human beings do not just disappear.....”

However, you can vanish a human being.

And that is what happened.

”..... whoops, there was one more.”

Yes, one more, one that I cannot forget. One that I must never forget.

I thought that as I fell asleep the night of that day.

And then the next day. I forget easily, but I am a university student, and so I must go to school on weekdays. To be honest, I wanted to get some rest for another day, but I had already rested for three days for a little trip like

this, and counting my hospitalization the previous month, I had already missed too many days of class. We were right before the exams, so no matter how bad my body is feeling, I have an obligation to drag myself to class. I prepared to head to school (I could not use my arm, so Miiko-san helped me change), and then left the apartment. At the side of the alley, Houko-chan, who lives upstairs in my apartment building, was crouched over. The straw hat she wore to block off the sunlight fit her well and made for a cute scene.

"Yo, good morning, Houko-chan."

"Good morning, nonsense-using big brother," Houko-chan bowed her head without turning to face me. "Big brother is heading to school now?"

"Yes. What are you doing, Houko-chan?"

"I am killing bugs."

"..... I see. Keep at it."

"Yes. I will."

Just as I was about to walk past her, Houko-chan grabbed my trousers without turning her head to stop me. "Nonsense-using big brother."

"Big brother, if you go to school today, you'll probably die."

She said, casually.

And I answered, casually, "I know."

"You know but you're still going?"

"It is a worthless life anyways," I shrugged. "Plus, I have exams soon."

Is that so, Houko-chan let go. She still did not turn to look at me, but in any case, I waved my hand and resumed walking to university.

Class was as boring as ever. Thinking it boring is just a personal problem, so there is no point in complaining. That is what university is about. Regardless of whether we were just before exams or not, regardless of whether I attended or not, this system will never, ever change. I passed time in the class that I found boring due to my own fault by reading the book *Shi no Kaisousen* [2)] that I had borrowed from Nanami. The cover and the book itself was so old that it was somewhat hard to read. It was a box-bound hardcover, and it was oddly-shaped so that it did not fit in my bag, such was the incomprehensible taste of Nanami. However, I found the content of the book extremely amusing and interesting.

And then after lunch break came basic exercise. I bought a snack pastry for lunch, and then climbed the stairs to go to the fourth floor, where the

basic exercise room resided. I wanted to use the elevator, but for whatever reason I did not feel like using the elevator today.

"..... what does not feeling like using the elevator mean, anyways."

Come to think of it – Utsurigi hated elevators. Not that it mattered any, but I wondered why.

Was it because it made him feel trapped.....?

I arrived at the classroom while thinking that, and found myself looking upon a rather bizarre spectacle. Several of my classmates were lined up by the door, as if they were peeking in. They should just go in, but they all had a serious expression, peeping in on the classroom after cracking the door open just a bit.

"..... what are you all doing?"

"Oh, Ikkun," Yashige-san (Wears coats during the summer. Collects beads as a hobby) looked in my direction. "Long time no see. Ah, you're hurt again, too."

"Mm. Hey you're right it's Ikkun," Manayama-san (Jersey and high-heel. Considers Dogla + Magla scripture) [3] also noticed me, and waved me over. "C'mere'sec! Look, Ikkun, don't jus' stand there an' c'mon an' look, lookylook."

"What? Just go in already–"

"Nowaynowaynoway!" Yoshimaki-kun (Combed-back blond hair and short jeans. Wants to become a space pilot) became agitated and held down my hand when I grabbed the knob. "What're you doing what're you doing, to our precious treasure?"

"Treasure?"

"There's a strange woman inside right now," Marchen-san (Hamster on the right shoulder. Goth-loli) explained. "And that's why it feels kinda – weird to go in?"

"Strange woman? Not a classmate?"

"Yeah! But she's really cool!" "Yeah! Seriously!" "Really pretty," "And really tall– with pretty hair–" "And long legs–" "Kinda seems like a wild type?" "Looks really strong!" "Like she can have her way with me?" "– and red–" "Feels hard to approach for some reason–" "Elegant but kinda manly, and really–"

"Wait."

I stopped them.

"Did someone just say *and red*?"

"Yup? I did, why?"

"– I have a feeling. Can everyone step aside and let me go through?"

Instantly, their eyes sparked. And as if they were waiting for the moment, their voices went in sync,

"Wow, Ikkun! He does something we never could, without even blinking! What a guy!" [4)]

And they shouted with joy.

I hate them.

I ignored them and opened the door.

And then, of course.

"– yo."

Displaying too pompous an attitude was mankind's strongest contractor, Aikawa Jun, seated with both legs on top of my desk. As usual, she wore an insanely red suit and gave off an intimidating aura. Her appearance alone was like a work of art.

"What a coincidence to meet in a place like this, Ii-tan."

"– if this is a coincidence, no one would ever roll a die....."

"Hahah. True that," Aikawa-san laughed sarcastically, and then she jumped while remaining in that posture. She flew over a desk, and landed in front of me. "Yup. To tell you the truth, I came to see you."

"Uh huh..... well, sure, but please do not jump while in a seated position." [5)]

"Oh don't be like that between the two of us, after all we've been through," Aikawa-san wrapped her arms intimately around my shoulder. Our faces, our chins became inordinately close. And then she faced my classmates and said, "So then, Extras, I'm gonna abduct this bride."

"Go ahead, please."

They said in unison.

I hate them so much.

The powerless nineteen-year-old bride was thus escorted, I mean dragged out of the classroom. Aikawa-san kept her arm around my shoulder and did not let go, or if anything it felt more like she locked her arm around me and kept our bodies together. As if she were trying to hug me to her. I wondered how we looked to others.

Certainly not lovers.

..... is what I immediately thought after simulating it in my head, and a part of me felt a bit downed by that.

"Hmm? 's wrong, Ii-tan? You're even quieter than usual. Ya feeling down?"

"No..... and more importantly, could you please get off me?"

"What? That's harsh," Aikawa-san responded to me with a mocking tone. "Sister's all hurt now, all hurt, if you're gonna be like that. Ii-tan's so cold. You cold person. Meanie meanie, monster-."

"It's hot. It's summer. It's hard to walk."

"You just gotta admit you're embarrassed. Such a boy," Aikawa-san giggled and she finally let go. "Well, can't say that's not a cute point of yours. Maniacs into that stuff probably can't get enough of it. So, how're you doing?"

"..... what do you want? Coming to university. You seem surprisingly bored."

"Mmm. More like I put a lot of effort into getting bored. I finally finished a job."

"Is that so. A job."

"Really cold, Ii-tan," Aikawa-san said with a forced chuckle. "Alright, alright..... I'll fess up then. Alright, I came here to see you."

"Well of course. You said that earlier, too."

We left campus. It was still lunch break, so campus was filled with people milling about. Aikawa-san and I weaved through the crowd. It seemed she had an objective, as she had no hesitation in her steps. I felt a bit of anxiety over where we might be headed, but I followed her anyways.

"In other words, I want to make up with you."

Aikawa-san said. I was so incredibly surprised at how frank she was that I became speechless for a bit. And then right after that I felt like I had become extremely happy – but at the same time, it felt a bit lacking.

Hmm. No. Not like this. Our Aikawa Jun is more–

"So I'm gonna make you apologize."

Aikawa-san continued without nary a hitch. I balled my right hand and did a fist pump. That is it. That is it that is it that is it. That is Aikawa Jun.

"I do not mind – I do not mind at all," I nodded. "Ishimaru Kouta-san. I was in the wrong, so I apologize."

Aikawa-san puckered her lips in response and said, "Alright, forgiven."

“Yup. I mean, I had to punch you there. But I wanna make up with you, so I’ll acquiesce.”

Ooph, is that her definition of acquiescing?

This is how Aikawa Jun needs to be.

“I do not mind then. I want to make up with Aikawa-san too–”

“It’s Jun,” Aikawa-san showed no mercy even now. “I keep telling you not to call me by my name. Cut it out and remember it already.”

”– I, too, do not want to fight with Jun-san.....” I mean, really, seriously. ”..... so, was that braided hair a wig or something?”

“Yup. Disguise equipment. The hat and the glasses. Well, it was pretty comically typical,” Aikawa-san answered while combing her hair up. “But you know, you didn’t notice for so long. I mean, I knew you knew how much I love disguising myself, but part of me wondered if you ended up never realizing it. Guess you aren’t that bad, though.”

“Well, of course..... I had completely forgotten, but if one is to take the Lupin III role, that would be it.”

“Hahah, maybe. But you know, I don’t think I gave any hints about it this time, but Ii-tan, when’d you realize?”

“No, you gave a lot of hints..... for example, when we escaped the seventh ward, we got through the voice recognition system..... and *Kouta-san* called it simple, but there is no way it is anything simple. It is a defense system built by none other than Kunagisa Tomo, after all. Just any vocal mimicry would not cut it. And, you gave me the lock-picking knife. This is also strange. After giving me that, how in the world did *Kouta-san* go through other locks? But when it comes to these two, mankind’s strongest’s vocal mimicry and lock-opening skills would suffice.....”

“So you came to that determination after using the same forced logic as Shadou Kyouichirou.”

Aikawa-san playfully shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, you’re right. **Anyone can perform vocal mimicry well enough to dupe people** – but I’m probably the only one that can mimic vocal wavelengths. I had to then, though.”

“Jun-san was also the one that told me that no one would use the surname *Zerozaki*, too.”

“Did I? I don’t remember that.”

“Indeed. But you know, all of those are after-the-fact reasons..... I realized, or rather, I thought something was wrong with *Kouta-san* at the very, very end. At the end, when *Kouta-san* gave me the lock-picking knife, she said, something like *The knife in your right pocket is not enough, is it?*.”

“Hmm. I did, didn’t I.”

“But, I had equipped the knife in my left pocket,” I said. “I moved it over because I thought it would be easier to reach that way. That morning. Yet despite that, *Kouta-san* said the *right pocket*. If she had said the knife in the left pocket, it would simply be observational skills – but the knife in the right pocket meant it was simply **prior information**. And the only person who would have that prior information would be the person who gave me the knife and holster in the first place, Jun-san.”

”– damn.”

Aikawa-san slapped her forehead.

“Ahh..... I see. What a dumb slip.”

“So Jun-san makes mistakes, too. I wondered if you had done it on purpose.”

“Nah. I probably let down my guard a bit. Nah, not that. I was probably that pissed at you,” she cynically laughed. “I’m still in need of training, I guess.”

“Training. That is what Ishikawa Goemon said – however, this was quite mean of you, Jun-san. Why did you not just tell me? If I knew Ishimaru Kouta was Akawa Jun, I would have trusted you more–”

Trust. Oh come on, it was a job for me too. And you’ve got pretty loose lips. And above all, it was pretty funny seeing how you reacted.”

“So that was the reason.”

“I just meant to make fun of you when I first called out to you. But then the next day you got caught. Well I mean, I can’t just leave you there then, can I?”

She said, as if it was the natural course of action to take.

“So, I figured I might as well keep teasing you while helping you, so I kept up my disguise–”

..... she said that as if it was the natural course of action to take, too.

“But then you started saying you didn’t need my help. And you know, as a contractor I can’t really help people who say they don’t need help, so I was like what gives? ..... well, no,” Aikawa-san shrugged. “Mmmmm, since

we're at it, I'll be honest, but I was moved by your line then. *Glad that you were able to be friends*. That one, I missed my chance to talk."

Augh.

Ahh – that time. I did say something like that. Without thinking that I was saying it in front of the person. I said how I felt because I thought I was in front of *Kouta-san*, who I would *never see again*.

"I've been grateful that we'd become friends for a long time now," Aikawa-san said to me, mockingly. "I love you, Ii-tan."

"....."

Guah. Embarrassing. Very embarrassing. I. Eek. This is bad. Topic. Need to change topic. What. To what.

"B, but, why did you use an alias? How unlike Jun-san. Leaving Zerozaki Itoshiki aside as a bad joke, what was Ishimaru Kouta?"

"It's a bit complicated to explain, but..... well, to repeat myself, it was a job, so I couldn't help it. Well, there're work secrets so I can't really tell you much – but this job was actually a burglary contract, and basically Ishimaru Kouta actually exists."

"Huh – then Jun-san was burglarizing in that person's stead?"

"Yeah. Kouta and I don't get along. She talks politely like that, but she's really vile. She's not so much Lupin III so much as she's Kaijin Nijuumensou [6)]. The real Kouta wouldn't have asked for assistance nor have helped you. Well, I was gonna turn her down because it's a request from Kouta, but then I realized it put me in the same exact spot as you and Kunagisa-chan. And I was worried about you two, so I accepted the job."

This person was putting personal feelings into her work!

"But, why did that – Kouta-san, the real one, ask Jun-san instead of doing it herself?"

"Mmhmm. That Kouta. She hates Neo."

That one put personal feelings in, too.

"I kinda like him though. You know, he's doing the most scumbag thing, but it's hard to hate him. Like a mouse? Hahah, maybe Ii-tan's a bit like that too?"

"Please do not put me in the same vein as that person..... but, that would mean Neo-san has been acquainted with Kouta-san in the past? But he still did not notice?"

“Of course he wouldn’t. Leaving aside how good my disguise is, people don’t really look at other people. Just the same as you not having recognized me. Ah, but Kunagisa-chan might have noticed.”

“Might have.”

Yes, with Kunagisa Tomo’s eyes and memory, it would not be surprising if she had noticed. Although the problem is that she would not bother to tell anyone. Maybe that was why Kunagisa ended up spaced out when Kouta-san appeared in front of the cage in the basement of the fourth ward. Not that I had asked her, and I did not intend to ask her, for confirmation.

“Well, yeah. I guess it means this time I was Tuxedo Mask.”

”.....”

It appears mankind’s strongest contractor enjoys comics for little girls.

“However – I guess you would not notice. Even though it was not like you had changed your height..... or did you?”

“I could, but there’s no reason to. Once they’ve fixated on a thought, people are really easy to trick. – ahh, but just one thing, the real Kouta doesn’t wear glasses. That was just to trick you.”

“Uh huh..... but just glasses.....?”

“That’s how it goes. You know, they block out the eyes for juvenile suspects with a black bar, right? It’s the same thing. Did you know if you cover the eyes it becomes really hard to recognize someone? You know. No matter what people wear, there’s nothing you can do about the **eyes and fingerprints**,” Aikawa-san continued. “That’s why aside from that, you can **crush the eyes, wear sunglasses**, or in other cases **growing your hair long and hiding your entire face, or suddenly cutting the hair to turn into a skinhead** are pretty good tactics, kinda like wearing gloves.”

”..... uh huh, I see,” I tried to answer with as calm a voice as possible. “I see.”

“There’s nothing more I see than that. Well, that’s all. So basically I was just using the name Ishimaru Kouta to trick Neo. Pretty good job by mankind’s strongest contractor, right?”

Aikawa-san grinned.

Ahh, shit. Yes, yes, you’re cool.

I feel like I am in love, literally.

”..... so, how did your job go?”

“Hmm? Like I said, I *finished a job*. When I say that, it means I finished it. This Aikawa Jun has never failed a job.”

“Probably.”

“Of course..... that was because you helped me, Ii-tan,” Aikawa-san slapped my back again. “That was what you were doing, right? You gathered everyone in one spot, and that let me roam freely around the facility. I’m especially grateful you make the first ward uninhabited.”

”..... you are welcome,” I absent-mindedly nodded. “Well, that was..... returning the favor a bit.”

“How conscientious of you.”

“I lie but I do not break promises.”

“Mmhmm..... though that sounds like a giant lie. *Do not judge people by their appearances. Except for the wanted*, or something?”

”..... um, that, can we forget about that..... Mikoko-chan will be angry.”

“Fufufu. This joke is mine.”

“You are plagiarizing.”

“Sounds like you don’t know about conservation of energy. Like *Go forward while moving backwards, but moonwalk*!”

She has perfected it.

And then Aikawa-san stopped walking, and put out her right hand to me.

“And so. Handshake, for making up. Or would Ii-tan rather a kiss for making up?”

“Uh. Umm,” I wavered, but I ended up just taking her hand, such a chicken I am. “Well, thank you.”

“And you,” Aikawa-san smiled seductively. “For a long, long relationship.”

We left the university grounds, and Aikawa-san continued walking. Where in the world was she headed? Given how she was walking, it was clear she had a specific objective in mind, and I also did not expect her to tell me before we reached the place.

“Mm? What’s that what’s that? You’re reading a pretty old book.”

I did not know whether she knew how I felt, but regardless, she spotted Nanami’s book jutting out of my bag.

“It is a book I have borrowed from a certain witch. Apparently a mystery novel.”

“Hmm. Let me see,” and then she pulled the book out of my bag, took it out of the box, and then flipped through the pages. But she seemed to quickly lose interest, and put the book back in the box. “Hmph. Boring. Just throw it away.”

And just as she said that, she ripped the book, box included, in half, and then threw the remains toward West Main Street. Several trucks passed by right on time, and Nanami’s book was extinguished from this world.

”.....”

“Feels good to throw away garbage.”

”..... yes, indeed.”

Goethe’s words and Taishi’s words were nothing in the face of Aikawa Jun. And of course, I have no words to offer to someone who can rip a hardcover book in half vertically, either. Ahh, jeez, it was a borrowed item, too..... well whatever, it was Nanami’s, anyways. And it was all ragged anyways, I can just buy her a replacement. Should be about three-hundred yen at a used book store.

“Actually, I hate mystery books.”

A bombshell statement.

“They say they like unexpected solutions but at the same time they fixate on including logic. And then they seek tantalizing mysteries. Don’t they realize that if you stick to reason all you’ll get are boring solutions? I mean, maybe I’ll snort if 1 plus 1 became 3.”

“Uh huh..... then what genre of books does Jun-san like?”

“A good question. Ii-tan, I hate things that try to shed light on the strange or try to put meaning to things. I love stories that’re all mushy, like a boy staking his life for a girl. The stereotypical happenings, a royal road story, a cast of characters you’ve seen before, a familiar type of villain. The overused conflict of justice and evil, the hot-blooded idiot and the logic-bound idiot. A tearful happy end for the rival friends. I really love those.”

”..... I see. Royal roads.”

“Yup. There’s no need for the unexpected. There’s no need for surprises. I don’t mind cheap tricks..... a royal road to fit the king. In the end, off-road paths and cunning schemes are for the clowns and side characters. Don’t you think so? Hmm?”

”..... I have no words.”

“If you say so,” Aikawa-san smiled, satisfied.

“Right, royal roads reminds me – don’t you think this Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility story has similarities with the Wet Crow’s Feather Island incident?

“Has similarities…”

The gathered geniuses. The isolated situation. And the sealed-room death, the body parts that were never discovered after having been taken away–

“Yes. Now that you mention it, it does seem as similar as mystic eyes to contrition.”

“Come to think of it, without that incident, I would have never met you–”

“What is with that line. You are making it sound like a tearful final episode.”

Aikawa-san simply curled her lips and laughed at my joke. “Ii-tan, do you believe in meetings of destiny?” I thought for a moment, and then shook my head.

“I can believe in destiny – but I do not believe in meetings.”

“I see. Figures,” Aikawa-san said. ”– however, while it was similar to the April case, there were several absolute differences. First, in that case there were two, three – or four? anyways, there were a few, but in this case there was only one. Well, the reason for this is just that you **got just a bit** serious this time. Well, the bigger difference is that this time all the geniuses that were gathered were ***enemies* of yours**. You were hardly noticed on the island that time – you were hardly an enemy, but this time you were a fantastic *enemy*.”

”….. enemy.”

There was not one person who was fond of you, and even the victim was an enemy of yours. Seriously, isn’t that rare? The structure of the incident was **essentially identical** but the end result was the exact opposite. You did the same thing, but that the result was completely different is not something that logically happens often. This story makes you realize that what’s important isn’t the plot but the characters. That’s right, it’s like we took the Wet Crow’s Feather Island case, turned it over, and got **the backside** of it.”

”– Sounds like a boring story for Jun-san. I do not remember anything about that whacky island except for my love story with Akari-san.”

“I see. That’s fine.”

So said mankind’s strongest in a carefree tone as she yawned and walked. However, I was not allowed to be duped by that carefree attitude.

Yes, I must not forget.

The role of the contractor in the story.

The meaning of this person that appears at the end.

Yes – if the truth of this case, was that it was a **turned-over version of the Wet Crow’s Feather Island case** that had caused Aikawa-san and I to meet – then what royal road twist lay in wait ahead?

Royal road.

Promised.

– promised.

As we passed by high school students on a school trip, we crossed Imadegawa Street. And after going a bit further, Aikawa-san finally stopped walking, and entered a cafe there. The cafe, which played an FM Radio station through its speakers, was pretty filled, perhaps because it was around noon. Was Aikawa-san going to treat me for a meal? Then why should I do with the pastry I had bought? Wait, no, this is not the time to be wondering about such carefree things.

I sat, and Aikawa-san sat herself opposite me. And then we ordered drinks without much thought, and then she said, “So, Ii-tan.”

“Do you know what my other business is?”

”– about the case? Probably.”

“A businesslike answer. If you could crack a joke here your life would be so different,” Aikawa-san laughed. “Well, if you want to say it’s about the case, you’d be right – but let’s chat a bit more before then. We still have some time.”

Aikawa-san said, without looking at a clock. This person’s internal clock was as accurate as an atomic clock, so she had no need for digital nor analog clocks. However, it bothered me that she used the word *still*. Or rather – I finally realized it because of that word. Just as I had realized Aikawa-san’s disguise because of *knife in your right pocket*.

I see. **So that is why he was able to escape from that facility without being caught by anyone**. Indeed, with this person’s help – it would be possible against anything.

Perhaps – that. That was this contractor's job all along. Following that theory, would it not explain why Aikawa-san did not reveal her identity to me?

..... I think that may be overthinking it, however – however, I cannot throw away the illusion. In that case, including the case of Neo-san, would it not mean that by the point mankind's strongest had acted, that research facility – had in fact long since been left and abandoned?

My mind raced, but caring not for my inner thoughts, Aikawa-san asked,

"So, what's happened between Kunagisa-chan and you, since then?"

"What has happened..... nothing. Nothing has changed, why? We toured Nagoya together, and then I helped her home yesterday, and I have not seen her since."

"I see," Aikawa-san nodded. "Well, that's, how it would be I guess."

"Why do you ask?"

"No no, I just thought you like being hugged more than you like hugging."

"I do not understand, Jun-san."

"That's because I'm making it unclear. It'd be a pain if you got it. Anyways, your loyalty to Kunagisa-chan surprises me – loyalty. Like a medieval knight."

"You are praising me too much."

"Am I. I'm being pretty objective. Yup, but that said, your clumsiness really stood out this time."

"Did it."

It did, Aikawa-san laughed.

"Especially – what was that? Narrowing down the suspects through process of elimination, that theorizing. Were you trying to elicit a laugh?"

"You were listening?"

"Just the start. It was so stupid I couldn't listen after a while. So I heard most of it afterwards – and I had to jump around in darkness while Ii-tan was doing a puppet show. That was more important."

"....."

Heard most of it afterwards.

Now, who did she hear from?

"*Rooftop route*. You know, I should say something about your naming sense–" Aikawa-san said. "Can't use it because a woman. Can't use it

because rotund. Can't use it because old. Can't use it because bad sight – hey hey. None of those are actual reasons, you know?"

"Is that so?" I feigned ignorance. "I do not think so."

"Well it's risky, for sure. But that's why you'd want to take the risk, I'd think? Take it the other way and it means as long as you handle that risk, you escape suspicion. –and you know, to be frank," Aikawa-san pointed her thumb at herself. "I – this Aikawa Jun. Regardless of gender, while carrying a 250 kilogram dumbbell, even if I've become a grandma of a hundred years, even with my eyes closed – I'd still jump ten meters."

"Well, Jun-san..... is out of the question. I mean, you can run along walls."

"I can run along ceilings, man. And you know of outliers like me, so why would you throw away outliers like that? Did you forget what happened last month already? Of course not."

"Last month..... well, true. But not one person said *no, I can jump this distance.*"

"Of course they wouldn't. It'd put them back on the list of suspects. Maximizing the **system** of process of elimination like you did was something, I'll give you that. Process of elimination – anyone would pipe up if they were told *you're the suspect*, but no one pipes up after being told *you're not the suspect*. They wouldn't retort when things are in their favor."

Process of elimination.

From a psychology standpoint – there is no more foolish a methodology. However, there are situations in this world where that foolishness is the greatest weapon available – and not just a few.

"– but really, I think that distance is pretty difficult. Even I would not want to try that without being in such a situation."

"If you wanna go there – then you could use the **theory of process of elimination** and wonder if it were possible even for Koutari. It's one thing if he were an athletic muscle man, but he's a middle-aged science geek, you know? Can he really jump that?"

"Who knows?"

I still maintained feigning ignorance. There was no meaning to feigning ignorance, but it was fun having Aikawa-san corner me like this. Though it may be a bit masochistic.

“But, otherwise you would not be able to explain what happened. It was the only feasible solution, so I could not refute it.”

“Hmm. I see. You’re gonna be like that, Ii-tan. How cute. C’mere,” Aikawa-san took the opposite side of the spectrum and smiled sadistically. “Then..... you know. That story about going back, about how Koutari made a rope with his hair and used Utsurigi’s arm as a hook to escape the seventh ward – you seriously believe that.”

“Seriously seriously, and an extra, third seriously, at that.”

“Swear to god?”

“Swear to god.”

“Swear to Chiga Hikari?”

“I cannot.”

”– you’re so friggin’ cute.....” Aikawa-san laughed, exasperated. “Well..... let’s say you could sling a rope from the seventh ward to the sixth ward that way.”

Aikawa-san said.

”– so, **what then**?”

”.....”

“It can support the weight of a human being. That’s great. But what then? You make rope, use centrifugal force and momentum to hook it on the building. This is already pretty nutty – but what do you do after? Tightrope walking or something?”

“Maybe you do?”

“With the strength of a science geek? Not even circuses nowadays try tightrope walking without even carrying a stick. Even if you pulled out the kids from that school, Saijou Tomoe’s probably the only one who could pull it off, you know? And then considering your life is on the line, you wouldn’t be able to do it with any normal sense of calm.”

“No, you cannot say that for sure. While the probability is low, it does not mean that it is zero. You never know what people with their lives on the line can do.”

“You’re saying the opposite thing as you did earlier, Mister Whatever Works Now,” Aikawa-san laughed. “Then I’ll say the opposite, too. – hey. If you’re putting something as precious as your life on the line, why would you take such a dangerous gamble?”

”.....”

“If you’re gonna try such an idiotic attempt at tightrope walking, you’ve got a better shot living by just jumping down.”

“No, but. That would just be faultfinding,” I tried escaping by leaving a red herring, like in mystery novels. “The solution offered at the end is the truth. And in the end, Koutari-san completely accepted the suspicion–”

“Accepted, eh – hahah,” Aikawa-san laughed drily.

“Umm, what was it? The proof – was the hand print on his arm? But you know, Koutari never actually **showed that hand print** did he?”

“He must have given up.”

“Given up – laughable,” Aikawa-san really laughed this time. “Ahh, whatever. I’m tired of talking, Ii-tan, come over here.”

”– what are you going to do?”

“Punch you.”

There is no idiot that would hear that and walk over. I did not move, and replied by showing her both of my palms. Aikawa-san saw that and motioned to come over, saying, “alright, alright.”

“I won’t punch you, so come here.”

I heard that and felt relieved, and walked over.

She kissed me.

”.....”

“Hmm? What’s with that look. It’s not like it’s your first time kissing is it?”

”..... well, that, is true.....”

I shrugged my shoulders again and showed composure. With a completely unbothered attitude, I combed back my hair, crossed my legs, sipped coffee, and then spread my arms out.

..... actually, it was my first time.

“Anyways, what I want to say, User of Nonsense. Is that if you’re going to come up with a farce, you should bring a more believable lie.”

”.....”

Farce – exactly. As Professor Kyouichirou said, it was what a *stereotypical scam artist would do*. Replacing the truth with a memorable lie. And then to truncate the conclusive half of reasoning. To output a vague, half-finished solution, to offer a solution that could be interpreted in any number of ways, and to replace the truth with confusion.

There was no need for a correct solution.

There just needed to be an unexpected solution.

Yes, there was never a need for me to uncover the truth.

I just needed to surprise them.

No matter how you look at it, psycho logical.

Not actions, but logic of recognition.

"There was no helping it–" I shifted my eyes away in an effort to divert attention. Of course, Aikawa-san did not take her eyes off me. Ahh, what would you call it, a verge of white? "I had no time. There was no helping the lack of fine-tuning of details. I realized **what was going on** really at the last second, you know? And I had to come up with it while I had painkillers numbing my thoughts after Kokoromi-sensei treated me, so of course there would be holes."

And, and more than anything, having to act out the unexpectedness was difficult. For example, *there was a ladder in one of the research wards* or *used a helicopter* would be so ridiculous that no one would believe it. But it still had to be surprising.

"Stop making excuses, idiot."

Wow, so harsh.

"You know – **the detective and the suspect and the victim were all accomplices**, so you would end up with an admission of guilt by the suspect no matter what you said. So you might as well come up with something more elegant."

"But according to Koutari-san himself, it was a sixty, so I was given a passing grade."

"That's too nice. I woulda given you a one."

"You are really harsh."

However, I cannot deny that I had every card going for me. As the role of the suspect he had already prepared a solution for me – so all I had to do was decide how to cook it.

And that was not all, because I also had a favorable set of cast members. The researchers, the academics that had gathered in that research facility. They are used to wonders being wonders. They understand that this world holds secrets aplenty. A puppet show is a very simple performance for an audience like that.

That was why all I had to do was point out their oversights – point out their obscure and irrelevant oversights that they had subconsciously avoided because they were not worth any time. Given the suspect was an accomplice, it was like a rigged race.

And – pointing out oversights is the forte of the user of nonsense.

A bluff to buy time, a counterfeit philosophy.

If all I had to do was surprise them, then it played right into my hands. The smarter they are, the sweeter the sound made by nonsense.

"Well, considering that the one point was for the one point needed, it might've been a passing grade anyways."

"What was rough for me was that I realized things in **reverse order**. You know..... when did you realize the truth, Jun-san?"

"Don't ask. These things are better left unsaid," Aikawa-san raised both of her hands. "And, you'll feel better not knowing."

"....."

"..... well, looks like it's about time. See ya, Ii-tan," Aikawa-san gulped down the rest of her cup and leaned back. And then she pulled out red sunglasses from her pocket, put them off, and then faced me. "I'll go ahead and ask, because this might be the last chance to ask. Hey, Ii-tan – did you really never, not for a moment, not in the slightest, ever suspect Kunagisa-chan?"

She asked that, as if she were asking on the side.

And that made me pause for a moment.

"For Kunagisa, the lock to the seventh ward is like her pinky finger. You understood that, didn't you? The Professor wasn't just blaming her for the sake of it. I'm pretty sure to some extent he was dead serious. Because there's no other logical solution. Mmm, no, no, forget about that unimportant **boring garbage** like feasibility or impossibility or motives or reasons – Ii-tan. Were you sure Kunagisa Tomo would never kill Utsurigi Gaisuke?"

"....."

Mine even if I threw it away.

Unpleasant, for someone else to pick up my trash.

"– I."

"You don't need to answer. I just wanted to ask," Aikawa-san placed a finger over my lips as I began. "You worked hard this time. So, give it go for

just a bit longer. I'm, I'm glad, that my friend is an awesome guy."

Aikawa-san said as she stood up with the check in one hand. She looked terribly dashing, incredibly gallant, unbelievably cool, magnificently red. So bright, that it was hard for someone like me to look at her directly. No, probably, I had never been able to look directly at her.

However, even so, while looking straight at the red that hurt my eyes, I opened my mouth.

"Aikawa-san. If we meet again....."

"Yup? What?"

"Will you sleep with me?"

A voice that was clearly forced into being calm.

I knew, that I was covering it.

I knew, that I was not covering it well.

Aikawa-san looked a bit surprised at me, and had a stunned expression, a rare show of infantile-ness, but the next moment she reverted to her sadistic nihilistic grin, and stuck out her bright red tongue.

"You're a hundred years early, virgin."

And then she flipped the bird at me.

"Well, if we find ourselves in a consummate situation, let us meet again, dear friend."

So she said in the end with Kouta-san's voice, and without waiting for my response, turned her back to me, and left the cafe. I was left behind alone at the two-person table. I did not think anything for a while. I did not want to think anything. However – that was not a luxury I could afford. I must always be thinking. By the time I realized it, I had found myself in such a situation.

In the end – who was her employer?

Ishimaru Kouta?

Neo Furuara?

Utsurigi Gaisuke?

Or perhaps – Koutari Hinayoshi?

"..... however, next time."

If such a thing.

If such a thing were actually an option for me or not. What a difficult question to answer. However, if Aikawa Jun were to remain a friend of mine, then it did not sound like a bad idea to devote some effort into

making a next time happen. It might not be a bad idea to live a million years.

I thought.

I pondered.

”*Do not judge a person by their appearance* – well, you are right, Aikawa-san.”

I thought as I sipped the coffee in front of me. If one were to ask if it were possible or impossible for Kunagisa to perform the crime, I can say without a doubt that it were impossible. Kunagisa has that bizarre trait – or perhaps more accurately an oppressive illness that prevents her from moving vertically on her own. As such, using the stairs or elevator, or other such transportation mediums are not an option for her. Theoretically and physically impossible.

However.

If one were to adhere to untheoretical, unphysical hypotheticals. If you were to ask if Kunagisa would kill Utsurigi.

Kunagisa might not do it.

However, *Dead Blue* might.

Is what I thought.

”– such nonsense.”

Yes, this is of course simply nonsense.

However.

Even if that security were meaningless in front of Kunagisa. Even if on one else could bypass that security. All that meant was that Kunagisa held the master key – and even if Kunagisa herself could not actually execute the crime, if she were to hand the key over to someone else. Like how Kouta-san – like how AIkawa-san had given me the anti-lock blade.

It would have been possible.

“In the end, it depends on what Kunagisa and Utsurigi said to each other that day,” I mumbled, complaining. “I cannot imagine, a conversation between those two geniuses–”

I cannot even begin to imagine.

But if Kunagisa had **told him**.

If?

It would mean Utsurigi was able to walk around the facility at his leisure. He could disarm the security, erase the logs. He could walk around the

facility as he wished.

If he knew the back door – he just needed to use the backdoor. Refraining would simply be the last shred of dignity for the underhanded, anyways.

”.....”

Of course, if Kunagisa had told me the backdoor, I would not have been able to carry it out. I lacked the skill to use the backdoor. However, Utsurigi – that malignant did have the skill. And the brain to understand it – and the arms to carry it out.

Then of course, Kunagisa must have told him. *You can escape from here if you use this*. She would have taught him every last detail.

But Utsurigi rejected it. He was not able to accept that offer. He was not imprisoned in the small building called the seventh ward. He was imprisoned in the palm of Shadou Kyouichirou.

That was why Utsurigi destroyed his own existence.

“And he also destroyed Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.”

Truly a cracker, truly malignant bacteria.

It was a story that made you wonder who the Mad Demon truly was. Truly just destroying. Truly, doing nothing but destroying. No saving, no forgiving, no cursing, no killing, just destroying. A story that was too ridiculous, too ironic, too unshapely.

In the end – even though it was unnecessary, even though it was obvious Utsurigi would never escape for as long as the Professor used Kunagisa as a shield – even so for Professor Kyouichirou to have locked up Utusrigi in the seventh ward – why he was forced to lock him up.

Fear toward Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Fright toward Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Fear and the same toward Kunagisa Tomo.

“That Professor knew all along, too.....”

Ahh, I see, I finally realized.

The Professor found out that I had escaped from the cage not because of any reason like foresight, but rather because he had been passed the word. I see. He was annoyed because I was unable to solve the mystery – that I was unable to reach the conclusion that he had already prepared.

Indeed.

Including his conversation with Neo-san, I realized now just how many hints he had strewn so brazenly about–

“But you still never notice–” I put the emptied cup of coffee back on the plate. “But how are you supposed to notice? Although I suppose you could also ask who was supposed to notice.”

It was quite absurd.

Did I really have to put up with that absurdity? Did I really have to go along with that absurdity? Akawa-san gave me one point for my reasoning – but even that one point may have been too much for that reasoning. And even I could not rate this truth.

Ahh, Professor Kyouichirou.

Now, finally, I truly understand how you felt.

And Kunagisa Tomo.

Utsurigi Gaisuke.

“There is no way I can think and understand, or even listen and accept how you guys feel.....”

Much less predict their thoughts.

But the solution offered at the end is the truth.

That is the rule.

The puppet show rule.

It does not need to be understood. It did not need to be accepted.

It did not need rewards, it did not need ratings.

Nor demand, nor request.

Just, follow.

Silent like a lamb, feed like a pig.

”– the upmost logic, you scum.”

Make Hell the Hell named Hell.

Massacre the Massacre named Massacre.

Guilt the Guilt named Guilt.

Despair the Despair named Despair.

Confuse the Confusion named Confusion.

Dominate the Domination named Domination.

Don’t hold back, none can obstruct us.

Be proud, we, of this beautiful world.

This is the bedroom of the verge of death, rampage all you want as the verge of death allows it.

”..... freedom as you like and do as you wish, dying and reviving – what are you all, *Otokojuku*[7].?”

Truth..... the truth?

How stupid. How stupid. How stupid.

What is truth. What is real.

Cut it out.

This is – just a result.

But.

If you come up with results – no one can complain.

"No matter how you explain it or interpret it – it is nonsense."

It is not that I do not understand.

I do not know.

That is why my explanation, is to not explain.

Go forward while moving backwards.

The last wall.

– and then the waitress hurried over, having noticed the empty coffee cup. She asked if I wanted seconds, but I turned her down. Is that so, she parted with a smile. It was just a business smile, but even if it were a fake smile, smiles were great. Great things – never disappear.

"– and this is it for nonsense."

Thump.

Echoing footsteps.

That sound echoed above the endless FM Radio sounding through the cafe.

Thump – thump thump – thump thump thump – thump thump thump thump – thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump ——-

My left arm throbbed at that sound. I thought of the knife I still had equipped under my jacket, at the Jericho still hanging off the belt of my trouser. Well well, how unreliable an armament.

And then the footsteps passed by me – and sat down across from me. In the seat that was until just now occupied by mankind's strongest, without any hesitation whatsoever.

Legs crossed, and arms folded elegantly, too.

Covered in a rather stylish fashion. Probably from some famous brands, a pure white suit. Gloves. Shoes. Wristwatch. Instead of a lab coat, this was probably the standard fashion. But everything seemed to fit oddly with the bald head, resulting in a unique but intimidating aura.

While he wore sunglasses just as he did in the facility, the lenses were no longer orange nor black, but rather an opaque, as close-to-translucent-as-can-be green.

And on the other side of the green were his grinning, grinning, laughing eyes. But the back of his eyes were not smiling at all.

And he.

And he, continued, to say nothing.

"– ahh, it was my turn."

He was a surprisingly conscientious fellow.

Despite the situation, I felt a bit pleased.

The face of the rolled dice was pleasing.

I did not hate, nor did I find it unpleasant.

"Did you cut off the arms simply because of the fingerprints?"

He–

Silently, affirmed. As if smiling, nodded.

It was a very easy answer.

Truly, an easy solution.

If every – if every time, problems could be solved like this, so cleanly, so clearly, so acceptably, so satisfyingly – it would be great.

"Come to think of it – you were the only one that called Kunagisa *Dead Blue* – no one else knew of that alias to begin with."

Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa – probably knew everything from the start.

That Ishimaru Kouta was Aikawa Jun.

The truth, the reality behind the scenes.

And this conclusion.

And yet she remained silent.

She remained silent, and watched.

Alright, that is not bad at all.

That is not betrayal.

There is no betrayal where there is no conviction.

There is no betrayal where there is trust.

Even I–

Learned how to remain silent.

"Well, then–"

Well then, everyone.
Please bear with me just a bit longer.
I cannot quit such – amusement.
Let us begin the beginning of the end.

"You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?"

Utsurigi – Utsurigi Gaisuke, suddenly, without any forewarning or prefacing, as if it were the most natural of natural things in the world, without one bit of wavering or holding back, without a moment of hesitation or a trace of mercy, yet without any sense of pressure or any sense of accusation, as if admiring and disdaining, as slick and smoothly as if he were saying the most obvious of the obvious, asked.

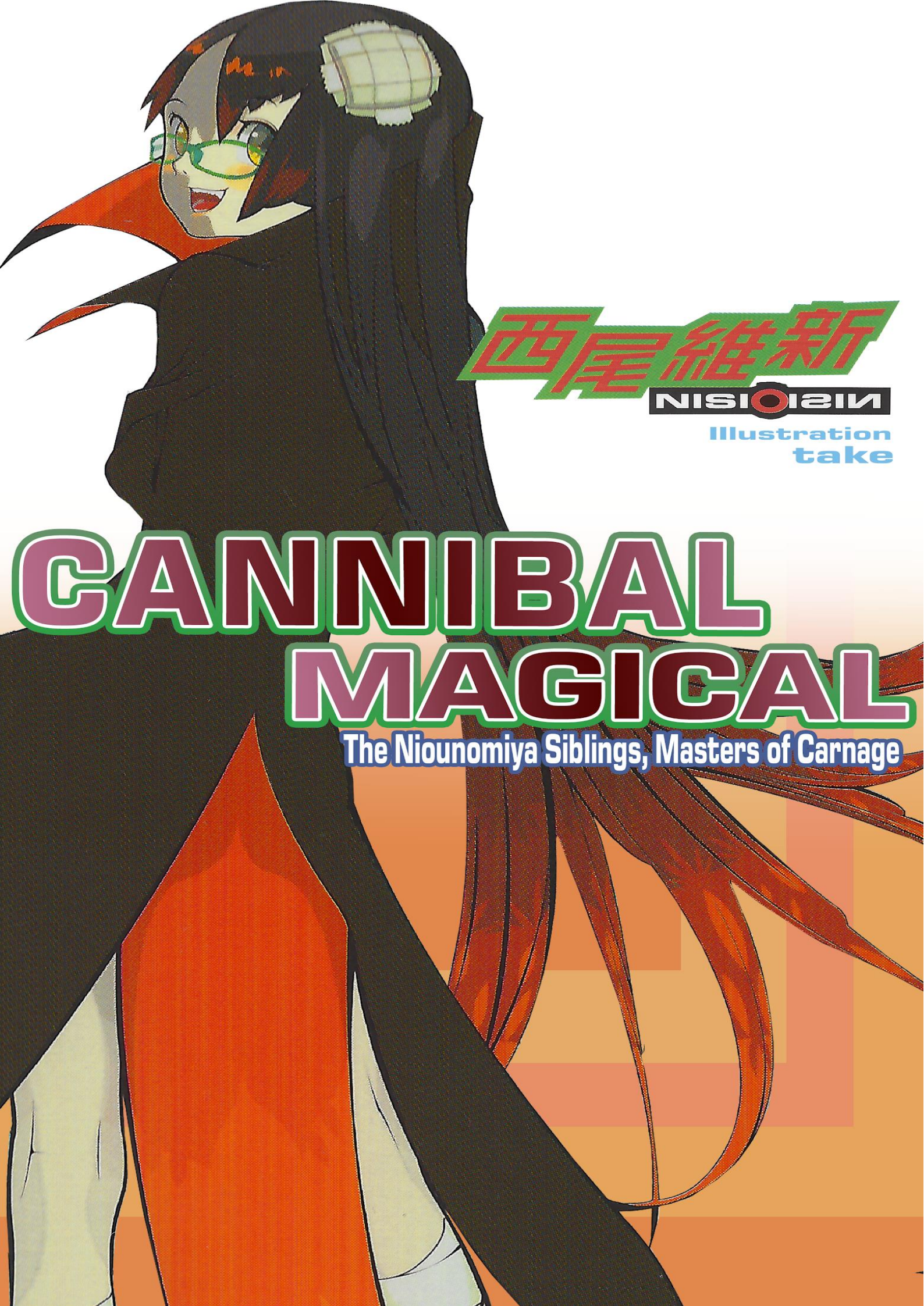
I answered.

"I don't know."

MAD DEMON & DEAD BLUE
is Very Very DEAD END.

[1)] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seiza
[2)] Fast-sailing Ship of Death by Oosaka Keikichi
[3)] BL comic

4.) From Jojo Phantom Blood. Yes, Nishio, we got you.
5.) William Zepelli
6.) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nij%C5%AB_Mens%C5%8D
7.) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakigake!!_Otokojuku


西尾維新
NISIOISIN
Illustration
take
CANNIBAL
MAGICAL
The Niounomiya Siblings, Masters of Carnage

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勝負に勝つ方法は大きく分けて二つあり、
一つは「勝利条件を獲得する」、
もう一つは「敗北要素を排除する」です。
物事には表と裏があるというお話です。

From NISIOISIN

ヒトクイマジカル

殺戮奇術の匂宮兄妹

西尾維新 NISIOISIN

Illustration take

講談社 NOVELS

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ヒトクイマジカル 殺戮奇術の匂宮兄妹
西尾維新

定価：本体1200円（税別）

「…具体的に、あなたは何の研究をしているのですか？」木賀峰助教授
「死なない研究――ですよ」
永遠に生き続ける少女、円形脱毛症をかくるまで登場しない研究のモニターに誘われた"盆百合"こと「ぼく」は、清潔アパートの住人、栗木一彦と、鈴月井春日とともに京都北部に位置する診療所跡を訪れる――
が、そこに待ち受けていたのは悪魔が「運命」そのものだった！
"一人で二人の匂宮兄妹"――"殺し名"第一位の「匂宮」が満を持して登場する、これぞ白熱の新青春エンタ。
<戯言シリーズ>！

Author
西尾維新 NISIOISIN

1981年生まれ。
立命館大学在学中。
2002年、『クビキリサイクル』にて
第23回メフィスト賞を受賞、
「京都の二十歳」としてデビューする。

Illustrator
竹 take

1983年生まれ。
横浜在住。
スキ　手塚治虫　　動物（とくに猫）

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スキ 手塚治虫 動物(とくに猫)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ME (NARRATOR) — PROTAGONIST

KIGAMINE YAKU — ASSISSTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA — EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT

NIOUNOMIYA IZUMU — PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NIOUNOMIYA RIZUMU — GREAT DETECTIVE

ASANO MIIKO — SWORDSMAN
YUKARIKI ICHIHIME — HIGH SCHOOL GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO — GIRL
ISHINAGI MOETA — GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU — DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI — WITH
KASUGAI KASUGA — ACADEMIC

AIKAWA JUN — CONTRACTOR
SAITOU TAKASHI — PLAYER
KUNAGISA TOMO — ENGINEER

Hitokui Magical
Cannibal Magical

Table of Contents

Chapter One --- Girl of Misfortune (System of Misfortune)

Chapter Two --- Man-Eater (Cannibal)

Chapter Three --- Thoughtless Departure (Dismembering Misfortune)

Chapter Four --- Observations (Experimental Subject)

Chapter Five --- Incurable Wounds (Unsayable Wounds)

Chapter Six --- Discrepancy (which?)

Chapter Seven --- Battlefield (Thousand Paper Crane)

Chapter Eight --- Perseverance (Final Station)

Chapter Nine --- Unconsciousness (Changing Ceremony of Idleness)

Chapter Ten --- Destroying Worst (Devouring Guilt)

Final Chapter --- Midsummer Night Dream

ME (NARRATOR)
PROTAGONIST

PEOPLE CAN'T INFLUENCE OTHER PEOPLE,
THEY ALSO CAN'T RECEIVE INFLUENCE FROM OTHER PEOPLE
—DAZAI OSAMU

A pair as one, one as a pair.
A pair is one, one is a pair.
The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.
He and she spend their time in the same body.
They spend it in a closed time.
They spend it in a closed space.
She is Jekyll, and he is Hyde.
A pair as one, one as a pair.
A pair is one, one is a pair.
There is no name for their body.
There are two names for their mind.
Rizumu, the *Carnival*; and Izumu, the *Man Eater*.
Opposite minds in the same body.
Minds of black and white, yin and yang.
On the surface is the flawless detective.
She investigates.
She investigates everything from front to back.
On the opposite side is the heinous professional killer.
He kills.
He massacres people from skin down to bone.
The younger sister who is too distinct to be called a copy.
The older brother who is too distinct to be called a copy.
Two siblings who are far too alike to be called copies.
The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

By the way, have you ever thought of yourself as the protagonist of a story? You don't need to have much conviction about it, but have you ever, at least once thought of yourself as an existence that's just one part of a larger story? Too predestined to be just chance, too inevitable to be just an accident, too karmic to be just a coincidence, too fated to be just an accident; whenever, wherever something abnormal occurred around you, haven't you ever

thought, haven't you ever ended up thinking something like that? That there is something like a plot outline **here** and that you and everyone else are just following it, idly and unconsciously, being pulled along the same way that a magnets draws iron sand to itself, creating a sort of image along the glass; that in a place you don't know, there's a great *someone* that you can't perceive at all who, in a place completely unknown to us, is creating a great *story*. If there's a person who has never, not even once thought of something like that, then they don't deserve to be alive.

Such a person isn't alive.

That's just inertia.

Just continuing.

Each and every person has a predefined role. There's no such thing as a pointless person; everyone is a cog in this world. Even a tragic cog that's just spinning around in place without any meaning, even such hollowness has a great effect on its surroundings. True solitude, which has no effect on the world at all, which has nothing to do with anyone or anything, doesn't exist, not even as a non-existent existence. Even existences that were long ago rejected by reality, those fantastic and illusory existences (whether those were called gods or demons, in this case, the meaning is the same), still continue to disturb their surroundings to this day.

There is destiny.

There is fate.

There is karma.

There is predestination.

Yes, the Story exists.

With an unwavering presence and overwhelming influence.

"If something is absolutely necessary, if it must be done, the intentions of the person who does it are irrelevant. If it's not done today, it will just be done tomorrow; if it's not done tomorrow, then someone else will do it. If something must happen, then even if it doesn't happen, it's the same as if it had happened. Conversely, the unknown possibility where it doesn't happen,

a parallel word of 'what ifs' doesn't exist in the slightest, not even as a single hope or despair."

.....

Well, these aren't the words of the user of nonsense.

You can forget them, as if you had been nipped by a fox.

What will begin here is an absurd and ridiculous story.

A story full of deception, which no one would trust if they were told about. A story of desperation, where everyone is deceiving someone, and everything said is a lie. A story through and through, in which all participants lose, each and every one. A story where talking is pointless, where not a single person listens to what the other says, and the moment they start listening their world shuts down. A spine-chilling story filled with blasphemy and gluttony, where there is no friendship or trust. A disordered story which crosses the worst with ugliness and weakness with fragility. A story with mountains of corpses and rivers of blood, covered in blood and death. An ordinary story which missed its chance to deviate from the norm and ends up destined to lose everything as a result. A completely harmonious story devoid of any meaning and intent and significance, overflowing with so much inaction and ignorance and artificiality as to spill out. A decaying story that's decisively colored by cloudiness, mixed with endless chaos. A dull and uninteresting story wholly lacking in emotion and any trace of service. A story with no readers, so opportunistic that it makes you question the author's sanity.

Not one decent person makes an appearance.

Everybody, each and every one, is mad.

Everybody, each and every one, is broken.

Everybody, each and every one, is sick.

Not just the copied siblings.

The girl with the deathless body.

The girl that keeps dying, forever.

The assistant professor who's just a continuation of someone else.

The assistant professor that keeps continuing, forever.
The successor of Zig Zag.
The zigzagging successor.
The biologist who feels nothing.
The biologist who is nothing.
The user of nonsense.
The bystander.
The Blue Savant.
The Blue Verge of Death.
Humanity's strongest contractor.
The Death Colored Crimson.
And the fox-masked man.

There is no introduction to this cannibalized story.
If that is fine with you, let us begin.

CHAPTER 1 — GIRL OF MISFORTUNE (SYMPTOM OF MISFORTUNE)

0

I’ve grown tired of hearing your lies.

1

To be honest, I had prior knowledge about Kigamine, an assistant professor at the Human Biology Department of Takatsu National University. It may not have been enough information to be called prior knowledge, but if I remember correctly, I heard that name around May this year at the Shinkyogoku from the mouth of Aoi Mikoko, a classmate of mine from the same department of Rokumeikan University.

"Umm. Kiga? Kigamine?"

"Wrong! You’re pronouncing it like some starving person! That’s scary!" Mikoko-chan straightmanned me with an exaggerated motion. "No way! Ikkun, you don’t know about that famous professor? It’s like a huge home run that hits the screen in the back, except during the season-opening ceremony!"

"Famous," I said after a moment of pause with a straw clenched between my lips. "Why would I know about a professor at a different school?"

"She comes to our school too! I’m even attending one of her classes! Third period on Mondays! Right after lunch break!"

Mikoko-chan rattled on energetically. "It’s a super popular lecture, so it’s like baaaam and then booooom, the huge lecture hall is packed together like potatoes being washed! Some people even skip lunch to get seats!"

"Huh. Third period on Mondays, that would be language study for me... Italian. Hmm. So, what’s the name of the class?"

"Hmm?"

"Name of the class."

"Uhhh."

"What’s the class about?"

"Hmm?"

"Class about."

"Uhhh."

"You're just skipping that class!"

"I'm so not! I'm just always sleeping!"

"....."

We were in the McDonald's located near the center of Shinkyogoku Road. We had come here because I'd been dragged along by Mikoko-chan to help her with shopping and I had come to realize that one must not incidentally tag along with a girl's shopping. I had become completely worn out at just around past noon, so we were in the middle of a small break. There were quite a few paper bags next to the table and in them were what I could only presume to be absurdly priced clothing. Mikoko-chan was apparently surprisingly rich. I thought or did not think that it may not be bad to tag along with her, after all.

"But you know, Assistant Professor Kigamine is really, really famous!" Mikoko-chan returned to the original topic so as to avoid having to talk about something inconvenient to herself. "And she's really pretty. Mikoko-tan admires her!"

"Pretty? Oh, it's a she?"

I couldn't tell by the name Kigamine Yaku, and given the way Mikoko-chan described the person, I had figured them to be a man, but one also doesn't usually refer to a man as pretty.

"Yup! She teaches while wearing a lab coat. Lab coat, a lab coat! I usually don't like science teachers because they're hard in the head, but once you get past a certain point, they're kinda cool. Ah, now that I mention it, maybe we can stop by and buy a lab coat since we're out here already. Ikkun, where do you think they sell lab coats?"

"I feel like I've seen some at stores that specialize in uniforms... also I think art schools would sell them in bulk at their stores."

"Art stores? Why?"

"Artists usually wear lab coats when they're working with paint so that it doesn't matter if they get dirty. That or aprons. Even science types normally wear one *so that it's fine to get dirty*, right? These aren't wedding gowns, after all."

I said as I imagined Mikoko-chan in a lab coat.

.....

Not bad at all.

"Although in that case, you must keep the glasses."

"Huh?" Mikoko-chan tilted her head to the side. Given her expression, it seemed her intent to buy a lab coat was in jest, unfortunately. "Ikkun is so weird. Oh well. You're Ikkun because you're weird. So, as I was saying... are you listening? Hello? Ikkun, what're you thinking about?"

"Hmm? No, I'm listening. I wasn't at all thinking about Tomoe-chan in a lab coat or Muimi-chan in a lab coat or anything. I wasn't at all thinking that Tomoe-chan would look the best in it while Muimi-chan would look absolutely terrible in it."

"Gosh! Ikkun, you're going on about silly stuff again! How vulgar! It's like it's not scary if we cross together, except it's a rope bridge!"

"....."

Ah, it's wonderful to be with a girl who plays the straight-man properly. Kunagisa and Aikawa-san and most of the people I know seem to play the fool and it exhausts me.

"So, what were we talking about?"

"You really weren't listening... shock~," Mikoko-chan doubled over in despair. Five seconds later, she revived. "About yesterday! Mikoko-tan ran into Assistant Professor Kigamine in the university lecture hall!"

Mikoko-san said emphatically, as if announcing a tremendous incident.

The girl really has tough vocal chords.

"A near-miss!"

"You missed?"

"It wasn't a miss though!"

"Hmm... wait, yesterday was Friday, right? Does she have classes other than on Monday? This Assistant Professor Kigamine"

"Dunno. Even if she didn't, she probably was just there for some other reason," Mikoko-san continued, not considering this a big deal. "And then! Because I wasn't paying attention, wham!"

Wham! Mikoko-chan held out both of her hands.

".....I ran into her."

"So you ran into her."

"Yes. Assistant Professor Kigamine's files and papers and books spilled all over the hallway. Wabam, flutter flutter-."

Mikoko-chan hung her head in shame. Really, she had such exaggerated responses. Although, if one were to say that it's not at all boring to watch her they'd be right.

"Huh... so?"

"And so I apologized and apologized, but Assistant Professor Kigamine smiled serenely and said, 'it's nothing to worry that much over.'"

"Handled like an adult."

"'I had already predicted beforehand that we would collide in this hallway. Our crash here was but guidance from the tip of the greater destiny.'"

"Handled so strangely."

Or rather, run away.

Run away run away run away!

"So I asked. 'What do you mean?'"

"It doesn't seem to me like the time to be asking such questions."

What are you, a hero?

"However, by that point, she wasn't looking at me anymore. She was picking up her files and then she mumbled something like 'in other words, in this world this girl and I only have the relationship *to collide in this hallway*... that is destiny. That is karma. However, a means for avoiding the chosen inevitability must certainly, inevitably exist... no matter how great an existence destiny may be, that is still but a mere landmark... yet more destiny

exists outside the scope of destiny... resolutely, and without any sort of opposition effect,' and then as Aoi Mikoko looked on with a flabbergasted look, Assistant Professor Kigamine turned her back to me and left. Chalacha-n, cha, chacha, cha-n. Chalalala-n."

"....."

The peaceful BGM she sounded did not suit the scene.

"So, Ikkun, what'd you think?"

"That person is definitely wack."

One cannot underestimate university faculty.

Well, what can I say, because after all, educational faculty at universities are people who have always devoted themselves to studying..... (distant look).

"Mmm."

For some reason, Mikoko-san had a displeased expression. She puckered her lips, puffed her cheeks, and showed an extremely obvious *displeased* look. It seemed she did not appreciate my thought 'that person is definitely wack.' It looked like Mikoko-chan had been hoping for something more positive and in agreement.

".....Was I supposed to say something like 'sounds like a cool person'?"

"Uhh... gosh! Like firing a hundred rocket-style fireworks in quick succession, except under a clear, blue sky!" Mikoko-chan slapped down on the not-particularly-sturdy-looking table in McDonald's. "Sure, you might think she's just a weird person based on what I said! But she was really cool! The way she moves, or more like the way she acts! In a way that I can't get across in words!"

"Even if you say that....."

"You know, as a girl, she just makes you think she's really, really cool! That's what I wanted to say! I just wish you could get what I meant to say!"

"You don't need to be so insistent....."

I tried to play it cool by sipping at my drink.

"Really, really, certainly, you could tell she's cool! Like, as a girl, the ideal form! It made me want to become someone like her down the line!"

"Cool, huh... well, I know a few cool women as well, but they're all tall without exception. At the very least, 175 centimeters. Mikoko-chan, it's impossible for you."

"H- how cruel!" Mikoko-chan stood up from her chair and made a boxing pose. "It- it's something I fret over! My height, I think about it a lot, absentmindedly! Ikkun's short too! Not much different from me! Abominable, Ikkun! Brute! Repulsive! Like a million-dollar smile, except it's McDonald's and we're entering summer, except you're a vampire and your face is safe, except you're boxing!"

"Mikoko-chan, you're the best."

Triple combo.

"Ikkun's stupid!"

Mikoko-chan spun around, turning her back to me at one point, and then chopped at me with enough force to crush my windpipe (although she stopped right in front).

Haa.....

But you know.....

"The real deal is different, after all....."

"Did you say something?"

And so.

What pulled me out of my pointless flashback scene and back into reality was a cool, clear voice. I stopped staring meaninglessly at the ceiling and returned my gaze to the source of that voice in front of me.

The location was no longer the Shinkyogoku McDonald's, but instead a certain large domestic hotel located x notches in a different direction, in its first-floor cafe. We sat facing each other at a table for four. One was myself of course, and the other was... well, Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku.

She was of course not in a lab coat, but rather a navy-colored suit properly adhering to social norms. Her fairly long hair was loosely tied together near her nape and she wore frameless glasses. Slightly thick eyebrows and a beauty spot below her right eye. Her front hair was parted toward her right, and even

with both of us seated I could discern her height thanks to how she kept her back straightened. She may not be as tall as Suzunashi-san, but she could probably line shoulders with Aikawa-san. Mikoko-chan's description of her as *cool* fit perfectly.

However.

Even so.

It was a shame.

Even acknowledging her as *beautiful* and *cool*, if I could add but one more word---

"---You look like you're appraising people."

"Eh? Uh, uh huh," I hurriedly responded to Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku. "Ah, if that bothers you, I must apologize. It's like a habit of mine."

"A habit, huh?"

"Unfortunately, I have a terrible memory. I wouldn't consider myself as having an observant eye, but as a result, or perhaps out of necessity, when I meet someone for the first time, I must hammer some characteristics into my head or I forget them entirely."

"I don't mind. I had already predicted that you would be someone whose nature was like that." Assistant Professor Kigamine brushed my apology and excuse aside and then she nodded. "I wouldn't call it so much a habit, but I also have a custom I follow. Should I call it a custom, or something else... anyways, when I meet someone, I cannot help but think about what that person means to me and where that person is positioned within my flowchart of decision-making. Fufufu... in general though, people do tend to look alike and it's hard to distinguish between them without taking a careful look, right?"

"Uh huh....."

"All of them just imitate others, like they're afraid of being distinguished from others, like they've learned to find comfort in being a follower, in being mass-produced. It's as if they've resigned their unique names, which is just

like saying that they've laid themselves at the feet of destiny, or perhaps accepted it... fufufu."

For a moment I thought she was making a joke, but it seemed by the latter half she was just talking to herself. In that case, she wasn't making a joke, but rather those were her *true thoughts*.

"Well then."

Assistant Professor Kigamine returned her gaze to me, as if she were firing lasers through me. Her lips were curled in a smile, but her smile seemed filled more with intimidation and her expression hinted less friendliness and more wariness.

"While you're currently in the midst of summer break, us professors don't have anything called a break. As such, there doesn't exist such a thing as idle time for this Kigamine Yaku, so allow me to get right to the point."

"Yes."

Incidentally, today was the first of August. As Assistant Professor Kigamine implied, university exams ended yesterday, and so I was beginning my summer break today. However, having summer break equated to *idle time* so simply rubbed me the wrong way. While it was true that I wasn't particularly busy, that did not mean that I was simply lying around being lazy; I had a couple problems of my own. For example, the left arm I injured last month in Aichi (regrettably, it seemed Kokoromi-sensei's treatment went above and beyond satisfactory, so while I would still have scars, I was told it would heal with no lingering effects, but still, it was too early for me to have removed the cast), or having to watch over Hime-chan's studies because she managed to score in the red for every single semester exam she took, or that I felt sluggish and began accompanying Miiko-san on her morning training routines (which are pretty rough), or, well, and so on and so forth. Anyways, I meant to say that I'm not simply lying around. To the point where I could have been excused if I had ignored the call-out of a professor of a class I don't even take.

I should also mention that I was told to meet her at 3PM, yet Assistant Professor Kigamine showed up at 3:15. I was tempted to ask if she mistook this for one of her classes.

".....Would you mind, before we get to the point?"

".....What is it?"

Perhaps because she was displeased by being sidestepped, Assistant Professor Kigamine scrunched her brows just a bit. She seemed to be just as obsessive-compulsive and difficult as she looked.

"Where did you find out my cell phone number? I'm an extremely closed-off person, so I hardly ever tell anyone my phone number."

"--I had already predicted beforehand that you would find me suspicious. However, that..." she shrugged. "Can be done in a great many ways. There are very few things in this world that can't be found if you wish to find them. Or perhaps I should say there cannot be."

"I want to know how, specifically."

This was something I wanted clarified. As for why, that was one of the reasons, or rather, the only reason that I agreed to meet her. A phone call to a phone number that shouldn't be known. I don't live a peaceful enough life to leave that mystery be.

"There is no meaning to be gained by knowing. Nothing." Assistant Professor Kigamine continued to parry my question. "There are many ways. You too could immediately think of at least three ways of doing that, can't you? So there is nothing to be gained. Nothing important or meaningful... this might be something important or meaningful to you, but the important thing is that I, myself, am the type of human being that doesn't pick and choose my methodology in order to achieve my goal. I wanted to know your phone number, so I learned it. Is that not enough?"

"....."

Enough.

In a way, she had told me enough.

More than enough.

"It is well to be wary of me, in fact it's a reaction I would recommend myself. The people that simply say that you should trust others have it easy. However, when it comes to making a decision about me, when it comes to evaluating me, I think it wouldn't be too late to decide after hearing me out. After all, you came here to do that, did you not?"

".....Indeed."

I decided to take a step back. I thought this was the type of person that's annoying if you dig too deep. Annoying, I say, but I felt like I had already stepped into her realm of annoyance, but still. Well, it's true that when it comes to the overall decision, and a means of responding, indeed, it wouldn't be too late to do so after hearing her story.

"It appears you came equipped with calm, rational judgment. I had already predicted beforehand that you're that type of understanding person."

"So, your point... what is it you want?"

"Direct to the point," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "You were a match for my glasses."

".....Huh?"

It was far too direct.

I braced myself.

Whether she recognized my mental reaction or not, Assistant Professor Kigamine smiled a mischievous, knowing smile.

"Do you believe in what is called destiny?"

"....."

There it was.

There it was there it was there it was. Ever since I recalled my conversation with Mikoko-chan, the misgivings I felt! The malaise! The wariness! The primal instincts of avoiding this situation! I thought, in the back of my mind, that she might bring up this sort of topic, but!

Destiny, ah, destiny!

What a grandiose theme.....

Second only to *love*.

"D-destiny... you say."

"Hmm? Ah, I'm not meaning to say we were lovers in a past life or anything of that sort, so rest assured. I simply want to ask if you believe in the sort of thing that can be called *destiny*."

"Uh huh... Well, let me see, umm... I thought otherwise when you mentioned such an exaggerated word as *destiny*, but if you were to rephrase that as *inevitability* or *karma*, I would have to say such rule-like things exist? Reaping what you sow, poetic justice. In other words... the *apple* will *fall*, *rain* will *fall*, *the sun* is *bright*, the *night* is *dark*, *something funny* will *make you laugh*, *something sad* will *make you cry*---"

"If you are *living* you will *die*," Assistant Professor Kigamine smirked. "I had already predicted beforehand that you would have that sort of opinion."

".....If you say so."

Karma.....

Come to think of it, I don't remember the context, but I remember saying something like mistaken karma. Now, what ever did I say that for.....

"Is something on your mind?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was just reminiscing about something. So, what was it? Something about karma?"

"Fufufu. Yes, *cause and effect*--in other words what is obvious. What is natural, what is natural, naaaaatuuuuuuraaaaaal. This is a case where I wouldn't mind if you were to pull out the quote God does not play with dice. While we are capable of affecting the minute details of the future, we cannot change **things like** the greater current. *Not dying* while *being alive* is something that no one can do."

"....."

"Nobody."

The way she spoke sounded like she was persuading herself more than she was speaking to me. It seems this person, in a characteristic not uncommon among the obsessive-compulsive, did not take any heed to the existence of others. While it would be hypocritical of me to say anything about that trait,

I still found it difficult to accept, having been called out here by the person in question.

"I understand it was rude, but I investigated your background."

Suddenly, Assistant Professor Kigamine seemed to make a declaration.

And then she curled her lips, seemingly pleased.

"Interesting. Your background is truly interesting."

"....."

Background... that word alone indicated nothing about how much she had dug up. That, or at least going that far, was certainly on a different level than looking up my cell phone number. Kunagisa would have **favorably** manipulated the critical points even without my asking. Half-assed information gathering abilities would simply lead to a pile of faux knowledge. However, what about this person.....? I may be speaking subjectively, but from my experience thus far, **this sort** of person is extremely skilled at these things. I wouldn't go so far as to say the snake knows the snake's path best, but.....

"It's already impressive for you to have been affiliated with the ER3 System, but what was truly astonishing were the records you left behind. To be honest, it's impossible for me to comprehend why you would drop out of the ER Program and leave yourself in the care of such an outward, northern island, and in a common university at that."

"You know about the ER Program."

Well, not that it's particularly hard to find that out, given that I had been making no effort to hide that fact. There's nothing you can really do to hide that you have studied abroad. That was why, although my problems **preceded that**, the ER3 brand name stood out to professors with all its shining glory.

"However, I would imagine *the records I left* behind are untrue. When I was over there, I was buddies with one Omokage Magokoro. I simply couldn't keep up in their system and turned tail and came home. I'm a drop-out, a drop-out. Part of it may have been homesickness. But anyways, the person I was buddies with was incredible, and I think our doings may have been....."

"And then, even after you returned to Japan, you had a hand in a lot of things. A lot, a lot. Aaaaaa looooooot."

Assistant Professor Kigamine continued, completely ignoring me. I would prefer if she listened to people even just a tiny bit.

"For example, this May. Several students at the Rokumeikan Private University, which you attend, passed away. And not because of an accident or something, but because of murder."

"....."

"Murder. Murder. Muuurrrrdeeerrr. Along with what can only be described as a terrifying mass-murder case that occurred at the same time... it's said that with regards to both cases, like an esteemed detective that shows up in a traditional, stereotypical murder mystery novel, solving them swiftly and skillfully, was none other than you."

"Hmm... that is a wonderfully comfortable misunderstanding. In fact it's so wrong I cannot even begin to imagine how such a misunderstanding could've come forth."

But the assistant professor didn't stop at my denial, as expected.

"Other rumors involving you don't stop at a mere few. And not just limited to those within the school, as you seem to be making quite the rounds. Well, of course, most of them, as you say yourself, are likely misunderstandings or exaggerations, but it's enough for me that you're a person that causes such numerous rumors, such misunderstandings, such exaggerations."

"....."

"You're interesting."

Assistant Professor Kigamine shut her eyes.

"You're truly interesting."

"Uh huh....."

She even said it twice.

"You're truly interesting."

"You don't need to say it three times....."

".....You know. I cannot forgive this."

"Huh?"

Cannot forgive?

"What can you not forgive?"

"**That a human as interesting as you has no relation whatsoever to my life**. It is utterly unforgivable. I want you to have some sort of bond with you."

"Uh huh....."

Wow.

I've been given many evaluations by many different sorts of people, but this was the first time someone had ever been so blunt with me. Ah... no, to be precise just once before, six years ago, by Kunagisa's big brother, by Kunagisa Nao-san, albeit nuanced in a completely opposite way, I was told something similar. However, even so, I must admit it feels different to be told this by a lady rather than a man.

"And yet, when I took a look, you were not registered for my class. And based on the classes you're taking, it didn't feel as though you would register even after this year. At this rate, despite being on the same campus at the same time as this Kigamine Yaku, you would, without coming even close to brushing paths, leave this campus. No, in your case, you live a lifestyle that wouldn't make it surprising if you were to drop out at the start of next year. After all, you don't seem particularly passionate about classes, anyways. I couldn't stand for this. I won't acknowledge such destiny."

"Won't acknowledge....."

"**Destiny exists**. However, **that destiny is one that you create for yourself**. That is why I called out to meet you today."

"Is that so....."

I understood what she was trying to say, but how should I put it, she expressed it with such extravagance. If she were to say it normally instead of in such a bizarre way, it would sound a bit more bizarre, I think.

"Well, I agree that I skip out on classes a bit, but I don't know how to reply to this so suddenly. To be honest, I can only answer that you're

overestimating me. There's nothing to be had by hanging around me. Although I admit I get dragged into problems quite often."

"It's my decision as to whether I am overestimating you or not."

".....Is that so."

This person really doesn't listen to others.

It feels pointless to say anything.

"You're interesting, but I myself am quite interesting, if I may say so myself. From that perspective, I don't think it's a bad deal for you to become acquainted with me, either. How does that sound?"

"How does that sound....."

"And in that vein, with regards to a certain allotted period of time, I would like for you to assist me in my research. I'd be thrilled if you could consider it a part-time job over the summer."

".....A part-time job."

"Yes, a part-time job. A part-time job. A paaaaaart tiiiiiime job. What a convenient phrase. Like... Well, that aside, I'll pay you a worthy sum, of course. How about 20,000 yen a day?"

".....How many days?"

"A week, continuously."

One week... in other words, an influx of 140,000 yen.

Hmm. Suddenly this conversation had taken a pragmatic, realistic twist. 140,000 for one week isn't too bad. I had at some point come in charge of quite a sum of money, but I had also used a significant amount of it on Hime-chan's academic fees and had arrived at a standard of living much like that of your average, poor student. As a result I could only look upon the offered sum with a grateful eye.

However.

".....Assisting your research... while I cannot say that I had never partaken in such activities abroad... experiments and such aren't my area of expertise. If anything, my speciality is thinking inside my head."

"I had already predicted beforehand that you would gently turn down my offer in such a way," nodded Assistant Professor Kigamine. "However, as I have come this far, I won't simply nod and stand down. It wouldn't be too late to respond after hearing a bit more, would it?"

"Or rather, Assistant Professor Kigamine. That sort of specialized research already has its own allocated staff, doesn't it? I cannot imagine you would be allowed to hire an outsider like myself merely because you want to become acquainted."

"*Merely* because I want to become acquainted... merely. Merely merely merely. Meeeeeereeeelyyyy. Fufu, you make it sound so pleasant."

"Is it pleasant?"

"In any case, my research has no staff. I request assistance every now and then, but in general I alone... well, no. To be precise, there is always *one* more helper at all times, but their circumstance cannot be described as being staff."

"*One*.....?"

It was said with a meaningful emphasis.

It bothered me.

"That aside, I fully understand your concerns, but in this case, more than experimentation or field work, I mean an even higher level, **confirmation of results** sort of help. If anything, I prefer for an outsider, a non-specialist in this field to be giving me a hand. In other words, what I want is not staff but a monitor."

"Monitor... ah, I see."

Confirmation of results. Then I could nod my head in understanding of the relatively high pay. She's no longer in the position of caring about the remaining budget. Although relevant to just a sliver of university research, there exist many important projects that would impact human society greatly. I had seen plenty of examples during my stay at the ER3.

"It will be from Sunday, August 21st to Sunday the 28th. By that time, the cast on your left arm should be off and you should be fully healed, correct? I don't intend for you to be performing menial labor, but you'll be coming

inside Takatsu University... is what I would like to say, but pardon me, you'll be coming to my somewhat difficult to reach private laboratory. Upstream the Kamo River, over one or two mountains, and then at the foothills... or just about. It should be from nine in the morning to about six in the evening, but I'd like for you to understand that the ending time may very well be extended. There are no buses nor trains from town, so you'll need to drive a car. Do you have a car? OK. Then of course, I shall pay for the fuel. A little over twenty for each day, round-trip. And then, you may be asked to stay the night some days. In that case, I shall pay you extra for each night."

"Ah, w-wait."

All of a sudden, she began speaking under the premise that I had accepted. It wasn't like I was being sucked into her pace during the conversation, but rather that she was the "my pace" type that completely ignored other people. There's nothing more difficult than keeping up with a self-centered intellectual.

"To date, I have generally gone with the direction of turning down such offers. I must apologize."

".....Such offers?"

"Yes. Picking up from our earlier conversation, the May incident. I refer to that when I say I've gone through some rough times tagging along with people."

I wasn't being completely truthful, but I also didn't feel obligated to explain in detail.

"So you're being wary, if I understand?"

"Frankly."

"Does the title of assistant professor at Takatsu University's Human Biological Studies not provide any insurance?"

"I'm not very comfortable with titles."

Especially because a lot happened last month.

"Hmm," Assistant Professor nodded, pausing for a bit. "Stubborn. Assertive for a youngster these days. Even though you look timid."

"Well, thank you....."

Hey, wait.

She just casually insulted me.

"I understand."

"I'm sorry."

"So you're asking for higher pay."

"....."

I'm not.

I'm not, at all.

"How about 30 thousands a day?"

"Woah."

The total went over 200 thousands.

Way too tempting.

At the moment, my sources of income were being a part-time tutor to three middle/high-school students, including Hime-chan, and helping Aikawa-san with her job every so often. The tutoring made for a decent income, but if I were to really break even, I'd have to tutor way more people. Helping Aikawa-san made for good money, but it was always with my life on the line.

Hmm.

This was worth pondering.

"30 thousands a day is still low, you say."

"Ah, um, that wasn't what I meant."

"I don't mind. I don't dislike youngsters who don't undersell themselves," Assistant Professor Kigamine chuckled like a villain. "Then allow me to unveil my limit. 50 thousands a day. That is my limit after taking your cost performance into account."

"50....."

That would mean a total payment of 350,000.....

How many hundreds is 350,000?

At that point, wariness took over. I don't wish to believe that happenings like the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility last month rolled around everywhere, but I started to wonder about illegal experiments.....

However.

Despite that, this was sufficient to make me understand just how much Assistant Professor Kigamine required me. I don't understand why, but this Assistant Professor Kigamine was quite infatuated with me. Hmmmm... that said, I feel like my tendency to attract weirdos was growing stronger by the day. Although, if someone were to say you reap what you sow, I would have to agree.

"It's still difficult for me to give an immediate answer," I said after contemplating. "However, I've begun to think it'd be alright to respond after learning more details."

"Is that so. Then."

Assistant Professor Kigamine took an A4 envelope from the bag that she had placed on the seat next to her and handed it to me. It was sealed tightly and it seemed it'd be difficult to open it on the spot.

"Please take a look over these papers. It's a rough outline, but it explains what my research entails and what I would like for you to help me with. And... if you'd be willing."

"What is it?"

"If you could gather a few more people who'd be willing monitors. I'd prefer for the monitors for this cycle to be completely unrelated to myself, so I cannot go out and gather people. Surely you have a few friends who you can trust?"

".....Guha."

I winced.

H-how could she say that? This person. T-that. That was the one thing that couldn't be used with regards to a person like myself. In other words, it was taboo. Friends who I can trust... that... that.....

"I'll pay them individually as well, but of course I cannot afford to value them the same as you. The fee I pay for you includes the physical directive to warp destiny, so in this case, yes, accounting for what I'm offering you, I'd be able to pay 120 per day for each. That's still fairly high is it not? Of course, I'm receptive to bargaining, but I'm also not demanding heavy labor, so it'd be problematic if they were to ask for more."

"A few... how many are you wanting?"

"Two or three at most. My laboratory itself isn't very spacious, so it'd be problematic if many were to come. And I do have a budgetary limit. My patron isn't that wealthy. So....." and then Assistant Professor Kigamine looked at the Omega watch on her right arm, which I presumed was intended for men. "This puts us at a good spot to end. If you're willing to give me a good answer, I can wait a week, so please email me at any time. My address is on the business card I handed you at the start."

"Ah, I cannot send emails."

"....."

She looked at me as if she were looking at a barbarian.

Shit, don't think that everyone has a computer. Is a cell phone that can't send emails that rare? These have their pros, you know.

"Does that mean that you're not well-versed in things like computers? I thought you were specializing in Information Technology at Rokumeikan University."

"Ah... do you require such skills for your work?"

"Well, to the extent that it's not bothersome."

"I can fulfill classwork fairly easily. I cannot send emails because of, shall we say, household reasons, or shall I say personal reasons. I did learn such things at the ER3, though."

"Is that so. Then I am relieved," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "Then, I don't mind you giving me a call. The time doesn't matter, be it morning or noon or late at night. However, I'm busy myself, so you'd be

leaving a message in most cases. If you could give me a ring, I'll call you back. How does that sound?"

"Understood."

"Well then, until next time... if we have a connection."

With that farewell phrase, the assistant professor elegantly stood up from her seat. Her slender stylishness was magnified when she stood. Indeed, as Mikoko-chan said, the way she acted, the sort of aura around her had that feminine coolness to her.

However, even so, even after acknowledging all that, if I may say one word, her coolness was far from being describable as seductive or alluring.

Yes, this was just the first impression.

At some definitive point, Assistant Professor Kigamine was completely lacking in humanity. Even after conversing with her in person as I had just been doing, I was truly given the impression that I was speaking to a computer. I'd even compare it to talking to a cyborg. Such a supposition was of course extremely rude; however, yes, the more I thought about it, she seemed off as a human.

I took the business card she had given me at the beginning out from my pocket and looked at it again. *Assistant professor*, *Takatsu University Human Biological Studies. Professor*, *Anthropology. Professor*, *Biology. Dr. KIGAMINE YAKU*. And then her laboratory phone number, her personal website, and her email address (using the domain ac.jp).

Yes, it was definitely a business card for work.

Hmm.

Biology professor.....

I called out to Assistant Professor Kigamine as she left.

"Um... if I may ask a question?"

"Go right ahead," Assistant Professor Kigamine turned. "I had already predicted beforehand that you would ask me a question at the very, very end like that."

".....Specifically, what are you researching, Assistant Professor Kigamine?"

"You would understand the general gist by looking at the contents of that envelope... but yes. My research could be called a rebellion against causality. A revolution against the existent destiny. A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come. But without ornamentation, you would call it."

Assistant Professor Kigamine answered simply.

Without any emphasis, without any hidden meaning.

Without any particular emotion, without any rousing feeling.

She answered, simply.

"----Researching not dying."

2

It may seem difficult to imagine for those who have never done it themselves, and perhaps this is something tough to explain, but the walk from Kyoto's Shijo Kawara to Senbon Nakadachiuri doesn't require that much stamina. If anything, you could call it the perfect scenario for taking an absent-minded walk. It is, after all, the perfect distance for taking a stroll deep in thought. Well, granted most of the reason that I walked was because taking public transport, like rail or bus was difficult with my arm in a cast, but that is that.

Yet still, for the duration of the roughly one hour walk, I struggled to come to an answer with regards to Assistant Professor Kigamine's invitation. It didn't seem too great a scale a conversation and it didn't seem like an event that would go awry, but if I were to reflect on how often I've casually said ***sure*** and tagged along and found myself mired in tragedy, I felt that the decision to tread lightly around the sleeping boar seemed the best choice.

However.....

Personally, I couldn't deny my curiosity.

Researching not dying.

Not dying.

Even while living, not dying.

"....."

That is an amazing thing.

Romance.

SF.

Mystery.

Fantasy.

It's entertainment.

In total, absurd.

It was the same as if one were to say they were researching alchemy. Does academia these days accept such research? At the very least, it would be

impossible in public and even if it were done behind closed doors, public universities wouldn't be able to boldly proclaim their opposition to realism.

Mm.

No, that's why. Maybe that's why she's not researching within campus grounds? At the very least it's not a public, or publicly acceptable endeavor... I don't know.

"Well, I guess I can't know without reading this thing....." I'm not one to walk around with a bag, so I carried the envelope in my right hand. I glanced at it, but I'm not clairvoyant, so all I could see was the mere envelope and not its contents. "But this is getting boring."

Having returned near the antique apartment I had inhabited since February, my eyes wandered to the garage that housed the Vespa (a white vintage model) I was gifted from Mikoko-chan. There were two faces I recognized.

One was Hime-chan.

The other one was Miiko-san.

I stopped my legs and looked at them. I wondered what they were doing under this blazing sun, and found that they were absorbed in playing kendama. The red ball affixed with string sliced through the air. Come to think of it, after having been hounded by Hime-chan, I bought one at Osaka's Tokyu Hands.....

"Miiko-saaan."

I raised my voice as I invaded the fenced garage. Miiko-san and Hime-chan noticed me and turned to me.

"Yo, Inoji." "Ah, Master-"

Miiko-san was yet again in her jinbei. However, it was after all August in Kyoto, in the dead of summer, in the heat of the most powerful of summers, so she had taken off her jacket and tied it around her waist. Her healthy shoulders were emphasized by the black tank-top and it was a bit blinding. The steel fan I had gifted her some days earlier was sheathed away by her hip.

Her samurai-like ponytail and that cool expressionlessness that remained unchanged by the heat.

As for Hime-chan, she seemed to have just returned from school as she wore a sailor uniform (although it was summer vacation, she was such a studious student that she was forced to go in for supplementary classes every day) and a giant yellow ribbon. She was looking at me, yet the kendama ball landed at the end of the sword like it was drawn by gravity. Hmm, as you might expect of the apprentice of the former *Zig Zag,* Shisei Yuma, she seemed quite skilled when it came to playing with things that involved a *needle and string*.

"Master, where were you today?" Hime-chan trotted over by my side. It was like watching a puppy. "Ooh, that envelope looks pretty suspicious!"

"Nothing much. Please refrain from flaunting your strangely precise instincts. It's nothing that Hime-chan needs to worry about," I lightly warded Hime-chan off and turned to Miiko-san. "Good day, Miiko-san."

"Yup."

Miiko-san nodded, lightly.

She just nodded, and returned her attention to the kendama.

Pfoosh..... clank, thud, phwip.

"....."

"....."

"Inoji, can you do it?"

"Uhh, well, I did play it a bit as a kid."

Miiko-san handed me her kendama. I looked at the red ball and noticed that even though I had only bought it for her a few days ago, it was scratched all over. I stole a glance at the kendama Hime-chan held. Her ball was hardly even touched, as good as new.

"Alright."

First, I tried to put the ball back on the dish.

I bent my knees to act as a cushion and succeeded.

So, next.....

"Woah!?"

Miiko-san made a sound.

I was so shocked that I let the ball fall back out.

".....What is it... you surprised me."

"Fantastic... you succeeded on your first try."

"No, um, that was just setting up....."

It's harder to not be able to do this.

The hard part about kendama is placing the sword through the ball, right?

"Hmm... if Inoji can do it, then wouldn't it mean there's an underhanded contraption in the kendama itself?"

"It says Japanese Kendama Association here."

".....Mmm."

Miiko-san furrowed her brows.

"Humiliating... there should be nothing in the world with a sword that I cannot handle....."

".....That sounds pretty ridiculous."

"Mii-nee-san is surprisingly clumsy."

Hime-chan cackled. And as she cackled, she made the kendama ball go *CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK* around the world and then with a fwip extended the kendama itself with centrifugal force, sliding the sword into the hole.

"Yay!"

".....Splendid."

Yes.

Contrary to her dull-looking appearance, this girl was extremely deft with her fingertips. She could play eight kendamas at once. She was small, but as if she were made inversely proportionally, her fingers were extremely long.

"Is there like a trick to it?" Miiko-san asked me. "Hime has been teaching me a lot, but I haven't improved one bit."

"Yes. No matter what Hime-chan says, Mii-nee-san just becomes lewd."

"....."

While I would very much welcome Miiko-san becoming lewd, I must point out for her sake that Hime-chan meant confused.

"A trick... but this is just placing it on the dish. Even when it comes to sliding it on the sword, you just have to twist the ball like this and it's simple."

"Ah, that's cheating," Hime-chan heckled. "You can't teach her the easy way out like that. Once people learn the easy way out, it becomes a habit. And then you can't expect them to improve anymore. People are growing Asimov!"

"Those are wonderful words."

I grabbed Hime-chan by her shoulders.

"Then let us put those words into practice."

"Nyagi?"

"Instead of playing around like this, go study."

"Nyagiiiii."

And with that primal voice, Hime-chan slumped over.

"Come, come. Hurry up and go put the Three Laws of Robotics into practice." It wasn't as though Asimov himself was a robot, but I felt like jumping aboard her mistake. "First, you must always follow your Master's orders."

"Studying is boringggg. Boring boring boring."

"No matter how many times you repeat boring, nothing will ever change."

"How would you know that? Something might happen and make things happen. Why do you always reject people outright like that? Geez, this Master always makes me lose the will to go on."

"Oh stop with the sophism... geez, I don't know why, but you've only improved at talking rubbish."

"Definitely your fault."

Miiko-san said, spinning her kendama sword.

Hmm, that may be so.

"Master. Hime-chan, just now, and I mean just now, so much that it wouldn't be a lie to say just one second ago, Hime-chan just came back from

school. Like a brave hero that just returned alive from the hellish supplementary classes. Why can't I play around a bit? It's like a warrior's break time."

"Warriors have no time for rest! Once people learn the easy way out, it becomes a habit. And then you can't expect them to improve anymore. Now, go ahead!"

"Umiii... Master is always obfuscated!"

"While I accept your opinion with some validity, Hime-chan, you should stop forcing yourself to use difficult words."

Obfuscated → × Obnoxious → ○

They're not even close.

"If you say so," Hime-chan nodded, bored. "Well then, Mii-nee-san, thanks for playing with me."

"Mm? Hmm? Uhh, sure."

Miiko-san nodded unnaturally. To her, she probably hadn't *played with her* so much as they were *playing together*, or perhaps she might even have taken it as Hime-chan *playing along with her*. She was a bit childish in that sense.

"And Master."

"What is it?"

"Bleeeh."

Hime-chan stuck out her tongue and with kendama in hand ran from the parking lot. Filled with energy, she disappeared quickly from our sight.

Seventeen.

But when I was seventeen, I wasn't that lively. I feel like I was a different sort of sunk, a sort of person lacking life.

Not that I want to remember.

"You're pretty mean."

Miiko-san said from behind.

"There's no need to force her to study like that. When I was her age I was a twisted fool, a small brat. Compared to that, Hime's a straightforward, good girl."

"But the livelihood of a student is studying."

"You hardly go to classes yourself."

"You're free once you get to university."

That said, let it remain secret that I had simply warded Hime-chan off so I could be together with Miiko-san.

"Ah. I wanted to play with her a bit more, though."

"....."

Oh, that was what she meant by *mean*.

What a child.

"Hmm? Come to think of it, Miiko-san, don't you usually have a part-time job at this time?"

Asano Miiko, twenty-two years old, part-time worker.

She made a living by bouncing around various part-time jobs and teaching neighborhood kids swordsmanship. While one would think she doesn't have that many expenses as someone living alone, she was passionate about collecting antiques and it had become less a hobby and more a pastime, so I had the impression of her as someone that fretted mightily over income.

"Ah, part-time?"

"Yes."

"I was fired yesterday."

"....."

And as carefreely as if she was passing a greeting, she continued.

"I clashed with a customer."

"Uh huh....."

She must've been working at a bar this time. Perhaps there was a rowdy customer... Miiko-san may look like an aloof, quiet, wise person, but she was actually the quick-tempered type.

"I need to get a grip....."

"You're apologetic, after all....."

This was the third time she was fired for the same reason. It's true that people can't so easily change even if they understand their wrongs.

"I need to find my next job."

"I see."

I glanced at my envelope.

Part-time. Work. Source of income.

Though they all mean the same thing.

However, even in such a circumstance, I can't drag Miiko-san into this suspicious job.....

"There's living expenses of course, but there's also the matter of the hanging scroll I found last month... I need to pay for it by the end of this month, so I'm in a bit of a mess."

"Is it reserved for now?"

"More or less."

"And how much is it?"

"14,000."

".....Wow."

Even among the antiques that Miiko-san cycled through as she bought, then sold, then bought with the money she received, then sold again, that number stood out. Simple antique cycling won't catch up to that amount so easily.

"How far off are you?"

"About 2,000. I was hoping to make up that money this month, but I was just fired from the job I was depending the most on."

"Is that so."

Kyoto is a tough city to find part-time work in too.

".....So you really want it?"

"Mm. It's an authentic piece from an artist I like."

An authentic piece.

How luxurious.

"Is that seller trustworthy?"

"I saw the expert's proof."

"Is that so."

2,000... even if I were to accept Assistant Professor Kigamine's offer, she would still not reach that sum. I would receive a total of 3,500, but everyone else would receive a total of 840. Well, the deadline is at the end of August, so she could fill the gap with other part-time work, or perhaps.....

But you know.

Even so.

I didn't want to drag Miiko-san into unnecessary things. Although if this were Nanananami, I wouldn't hesitate.

"Hmph."

Miiko-san's interest returned to the kendama. As I had suggested earlier, she spun the ball hanging from the string and tried to land it on the dish. While it landed on the dish for a moment, the momentum and spin made it fall back off. I wondered why she wanted to spin it onto the dish.

"Muuu. Even though it's a sword... even though it's a sword."

"Not that that has anything to do with it."

"Am I clumsy?"

"Maybe it's more to do with personality. Miiko-san doesn't seem the type to be suited to playing with compact trinkets."

"....."

Miiko-san was able to state that something she was poor at was fun.

Frankly, I thought that admirable.

If I were a person with any bit of composure, I may have thought I would like to pick up that trait from her. At the very least, even the way I am now, I felt like I wanted to follow her example.

"Ah. It's on."

"You did it."

"That's a first."

"....."

The first time she was able to land the ball on the dish.....

Perhaps she truly is clumsy, after all.

Or perhaps a natural-born hard worker.

Then I hope she treasures her trait well.

"Well, I'll return to my room as well. Are you free tonight? If you are, would you like to have dinner together? I can treat you to meat, to help you forget about your job loss."

"Unfortunately, I have plans tonight."

"Is that so."

How terribly unfortunate.

"By the way, Inoji," Miiko-san snapped the kendama ball from the air. At the very least, she didn't look like she lacked reflexes or hand-eye coordination. "Apologies if I'm being nosey about this. But about *that thing* in your room, Inoji, how long are you going to leave *that thing* in your room?"

"Ah....."

"I don't want to poke my nose into personal affairs, but this building has three underage kids in Hime, Moe, and Hou. I think that thing causes a bit of a developmental problem."

"I'm technically still underage too," I shrugged jokingly. "Well, you're right. Yes, eventually, I'll do something."

"Eventually."

"When it comes to *that thing*, it's partly my responsibility that things turned out this way, so it's a bit difficult to handle. That said, for now, there's no likelihood of problems that would bother Miiko-san, so please rest easy on that end."

"Okay. I'll trust you."

"Well then."

I flippantly raised my hand and when I had turned my back to her, I heard the sounds of the kendama resume. It seemed Miiko-san was quite enamored

by such play. That said, kendamas are normally an indoor thing, so I wondered why she had bothered to walk all the way out to the parking lot. Well, I suppose that four-tatami apartment lacks the space for even beanbags, much less kendamas.

Four-tatami space, tatami-matted, with bare light bulbs.

No bath, a shared bathroom.

Nowadays you wouldn't normally imagine such horrible living conditions existing, but the people living in this apartment are truly unique and so being here is amusing and very pleasant, I think. Along with the swordsman, Asano Miiko-san, there's that old man I finally found out the real name of, Hayabusa Koutoumaru, the ran-from-home siblings, Ishinagi Moeta and Yamiguchi Houko, the Worst Witch, Nanananami Nanami, and Zig Zag's apprentice, Yukariki Ichihime. When placed alongside such characters, this very ordinary user of nonsense simply fades into the background.

Really.

Without a doubt.

Exceedingly and interminably.

Essentially and unmistakably.

If you allow me to sum it up in one word.

"It's nonsense....."

I arrived at the apartment.

Wooden and three-storied.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, passed by my neighbor, Miiko-san's room, and opened the door to my room.

"Welcome home, Master."

I opened the door and was immediately greeted.

"I longed greatly for your return. I recognize and understand the fatigue felt by the master of the house, so I shall do my utmost best to relieve your burden. Will you have dinner or will you have a bath? Or perhaps you will have me?"

"....."

Among the lines in this world that number as many as the stars, I was given the one that would cause the most mental damage. I couldn't even muster a response.

"....."

"Why do you look so stunned, Master?"

Wearing an apron and displaying obedient behavior, yet undone by that cool, intellectual expression and that shoulder-length hair. She smiled faintly, but it looked nothing short of fake. When it comes to the difficulty of measuring temperature, I thought back to Assistant Professor Kigamine, but if she were like a robotic, cold iron, this one was like pleasant, cold water.

Her name was Kasugai Kasuga.

Kasugai Kasuga.

An animal scientist that specializes in animal physiology and animal psychology, a biologist in other words. She didn't only share a temperature vector with Assistant Professor Kigamine. Until last month, she worked at the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility deep in the mountains of Aichi Prefecture.

I say that in past tense because, obviously, it no longer held true.

Last month, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, who held the alias *Mad Demon*, and his research facility essentially collapsed. At the same time, that meant she lost her job, and because she lived at the job, her home.

"I jest. A playful big sister's joke. Don't look so seriously scared. How cute."

".....Yes."

And.

As for why that Kasugai-san is here. If I am to explain why she traded her lab coat for an apron.

----Here's the flashback.

"Yahoo."

".....How did you find where I live."

"I looked it up."

".....How did you get from Aichi to Kyoto."

"I walked."

"....."

"Let me in."

"Why?"

"Beginning today, this is where I live."

"Why!?"

"I was fired and have become freely unemployed because of you."

"Guh....."

"I was fired and have become freely unemployed because of you."

".....Well, that might be true."

"At this rate my life as a lady is at risk of ending. I would be happy if you could display some manly chivalric spirit."

"....."

"No?"

".....No."

"I see. A shame."

"You're quite quick to give up."

"Ah. I even prepared a maid uniform and everything but it has all gone to waste. A shame, a shame."

"Huh?"

"Well then, bye bye. Until we meet again."

"Wait."

"What?"

"What did you just say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"But you did. Say it again."

"I even prepared a maid uniform and everything."

".....Please make yourself at home."

"....."

"Neither seek nor shun the fight, oppress the strong and assist the weak, you wouldn't think that I wouldn't lend a hand to a person in need."

".....Thank you."

"Not at all, not at all."

----End flashback.

Well, all of that might be a joke or a lie so it'd be bothersome if you believed all of it, but the truth might not be much different, or perhaps not.

This marked the end of week one of living with Kasugai Kasuga-san.

"Don't just stand there, come in. It's your home."

Kasugai-san waved me forward in invitation.

The end of week one of living together.

She was gaining composure.

Or rather, screw composure, this was the sort of person she always was. Although I dare not borrow Assistant Professor Kigamine's words, while my first impression of her was among the worst possible because of the circumstance of our meeting, after having allowed her uniqueness to shine through by experiencing a slice of life together, I could say that it's very rare to run across someone as interesting as this Kasugai Kasuga. She was so interesting that I felt like I had lost my chance to kick her out.

"Yes, yes... will you cut it out with those jokes. After all, there's no bath or food. This room doesn't even have a refrigerator."

"Yet surprisingly we do have food. I ordered delivery. And sushi, at that. Because I received some special income."

"Hmm?"

"So this is to thank you for housing me."

"Uh huh....."

That's quite an unexpected and kind act of her.

Special income, did that mean she had found a place to work?

"Now come in, come in."

"Yes, alright....."

Next to the bucket of sushi lay a girl wearing a manteau.

"....."

"Doesn't it look delicious? I asked Koutoumaru-san for recommendations for stores around here. Actually I took a bite earlier myself and found it to be quite delicious. Since you can't drink, we can't have a toast, but I did prepare some Oolong tea. This is called Red Oolong--"

"Kasugai-san."

My voice sounded awkward.

Awkward!

Awkward awkward!

"What is it all of a sudden?"

"This girl, who is she?"

I felt like I was talking like a space alien.

"Hmm? Well I'll explain that in a bit so let's leave it aside for now. It's better to focus on grabbing some sushi first."

"It's not better."

Not better at all.

I could stake my whole existence on that.

The girl covered in a black manteau was small and seemed to be asleep. If I focused my ears I could even hear her cute sleeping breath. Even standing this far away I could tell her black hair was grown extremely long. I would say something about her sleeping with her glasses still on, but she slept peacefully nonetheless.

A cute face.

Probably around seventeen, just like Hime-chan.

"....."

In other words, underaged.

Underaged, in other words.

Underaged kidnapping!

Kidnapping and imprisoning!

And it being a girl made it fatal!

"Dark clouds... great dark clouds hanging over my life....."

Ah... I can even see the Alcor star.

No, actually I cannot see anything.

"Please don't say such accusatory things. You'll make me pout," Kasugai-san folded her arms and sounded genuinely insulted. "I helped a person out. When I was taking a walk, I found that girl collapsed by the side of the road, so I picked her up."

"Collapsed... picked her up.....?"

"Yup."

Kasugai-san answered, matter-of-factly.

And then she went ahead and sat down on the tatami, crossed her legs, and reached over to grab sushi. She popped one into her mouth, exhaled, and briefly had a blushed expression. She's strange, but her appetite, at least, was first class.

Just her appetite, anyways.

However, what about her common sense?

"Wha- what were you thinking!?"

"What are you mad about? I mean you're the one that's making no sense and being unreasonable. What was wrong with what I did? Or are you saying that you could ignore someone collapsed on the ground and go on your merry way? That you can walk along without helping a poor little girl? That'd be quite the human failure."

".....Guh."

I never imagined being told something correct by someone wrong could be so irritating.

"Now let's hurry up and eat sushi. All the egg ones are mine. Hmm? What's that envelope? It smells quite interesting....."

"Please stop trying to progress the story while ignoring such an important event! Like world domination, only if the world were a village of a hundred!"

I was so flustered I had a Mikoko-chan moment.

"The police! The police, the police, with prompt decision and prompt execution and prompt immediacy, please call the police! We currently have a vehement need of the police!"

"Oh please. Don't make it sound like I'm a person with no common sense."

Tsk tsk tsk, went Kasugai-san as she waved a finger. Perhaps someone might seriously call me short-tempered, but right now, each and every motion by this person seemed to irritate me further. Ah, I knew it, I knew this person would one day screw something up... I knew it, so why did I let her talk me into this? Was living together with a beautiful lady that tempting to be willing to risk the rest of my life? There has been almost nothing good to come of this past week. All that happened was that my already small room had become divided in half!

"Well, life is full of surprises. And it doesn't always go the way you'd like."

The exact person not letting things go my way decided to placate me.

"Hmm, alright. Then big sis will offer a bit of advice to the young worried boy. What do you get when you write problem(困りごと) with preparing(備える) and heart(心)?"

"What do you get?"

"Distress(困憊)!"

"Shut up!"

"I sense some distress in your eyes ☆."

"Stop with the ☆!"

"This was that girl's only belonging," said Kasugai-san as she deftly stood up while changing the subject and pulled out a wallet. It was clearly one meant for a child, given the fancy animal character (perhaps an anime character) inked onto the vinyl surface. Kasugai-san unzipped it and pulled out a piece of paper. It was a business card.

"Here look at this."

The business card read:

Great Detective
Niounomiya Rizumu
NEONOMIYA RHYTHM

And then an address and phone number (land / FAX / mobile).

"....."

Like, baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang.

"Now, now, is there anything you can say as to why it was wrong for me to not carry this girl off to the police, or perhaps you can't."

"Irony...."

No, irony is totally irrelevant in this case.

The problem is the profession written on that business card with a round hamster illustration and purikura stickers plastered all over the back of it, like it had been created at an arcade.

Great Detective.

"Wow....."

Who cares about some biology professor.

This is even rarer than Nessie.

More unidentified than an UFO.

Hyakki Yako, like the identity of a ghost!

"So it has been completed....."

"And a bishoujo great detective," Kasugai-san continued. "Bishoujo great detective. Bishoujo great detective. Right? How could you possibly sell off a girl so amusing to police influence?"

"So that was your reason."

But that said, leaving her reason aside, it was indeed difficult to call her decision wrong.

A (self-described) great detective wearing a manteau.

Completely and utterly a suspicious character, undeniably unidentified, and certainly public enemy number one.

"You're right... a great detective surely must have a black manteau....." I was so flustered I began babbling without purpose. "However, why does that mean you needed to bring her into my room, Kasugai-san?"

"Because. I came all the way to Kyoto because I thought being with you would be amusing, but all you're doing is living a daily life. It's so boring watching you work as a tutor and fall in love with Asano-san and have little spats with Ichihime-chan. So I decided to bring in some trouble."

"I see, now that I know what you're up to, please shut that mouth and be quiet."

And then choke to death.

Murderous intent.

This emotion bubbling up in me must certainly be murderous intent.

"I hope she's not sick....."

I kneeled down by the girl and placed a hand on her forehead. It was a bit hot, but all girls this age are like that, so this was probably normal. I thought about taking her pulse, but her arms were both inside her manteau. It cannot be helped then, I cannot just take off her clothes. I touched the vessels in her neck. Thump thump thump thump. Looks perfectly healthy.

"I already performed those ordinary checks. That girl is really... Rizumu-chan is really just sleeping. I'm a biology professor after all."

"Shut up, Miss Unemployed."

I tried telling off an older woman.

Rizumu-chan, eh.....

A strange name.

"Is her surname that... Neonomiya?"

"Probably romanized off the kanji, pronounced like Niounomiya."

"Hmm, Niounomiya....." I withdrew my hand from Rizumu-chan. "I feel like I've heard the name before... but where....."

"Tut tut, you're a university student but you really know nothing. Niounomiya comes up in the Tale of Genji. Even I know that despite being a science professor. One of the largest stories spanning 54 chapters. And of those the first arc began with *The Paulownia Pavillon* and ended with *Vanished in the Clouds*. Although of course because *Vanished in the Clouds* did not actually exist the arc actually ended at *The Seer* with *Vanished in the Clouds* being a notifier to the reader about the protagonist's death. And then the second arc sandwiching *Vanished in the Clouds*. From *The Maiden of the Bridge* to the final chapter *The Floating Bridge of Dreams* is called the Ten Uji Chapters and includes the volumes *The Perfumed Prince, Red Plum Blossoms* and *Bamboo River*. Nioumiya is the name of the protagonist's nephew."

"Ah, I see."

I knew I had heard the name somewhere. This answers that question without any doubt whatsoever. How nostalgic, when was the last time I read the Tale of Genji? That's right, back in the ER3 days. I read the English version for a class. This makes me run against the grain, but personally I preferred the after stories over the first arc. It felt more like an aftermath, like they were cleaning up afterwards.

"Hey, Ikki."

".....What's with that nickname."

"Ikki," I was ignored. "Are you not going to look under her manteau?"

"Not going to look... please don't treat me like some pervert. And you know, I'm not particularly interested in little girls. In fact I think it's something else to be drawn to younger girls once you become 19 years ol--"

"I think your odds with Asano-san are slim though."

She said it so clearly.

I was a bit shocked.

"But you should check out what's under Rizumu-chan's manteau because it's amusing."

"Amusing?"

"Very, very amusing. The biggest reason why I picked up that girl is actually under her manteau."

"....."

I felt like I was being tricked, but I fearfully lifted the innocent looking girl's black manteau and peeked under. If someone were to take a photo of this scene, my life would be over.

She was wearing a straitjacket.

You know the one that people recognize as the one Hannibal Lecter wore, the one for extremely dangerous criminals on death row, the one with no sense of sexuality. Her sleeves were crossed in front of her chest as part of the clothing and even then they were tied by two leather belts and probably because the size didn't fit her, the sleeves were too long and she wore the rest of the straitjacket like a one-piece dress. Just a bit, just a bit if you really tried hard it could look like an oversized hoodie. No, it can't. It absolutely can't.

I put the manteau back.

"....."

I am so done.

This is too much.

Just way, way too much.

I have lived nineteen and a half years to date and have experienced all sorts of trials and tribulations, but I have never experienced being in such a pinch as this. This is without a doubt the first time in my life I have been cornered on the edge of a cliff like this. I could feel the urge rising to accept the next time Wet Crow's Feather Island gave me one of their at least twice a month calls inviting me back.

"Leaving the manteau aside, how can you even take her pulse like this....."

"I wonder if this sort of fashion is trending with young girls these days. My my, I'm getting old. Does this fall under goth-loli? Death metal? Punk?"

"Can you really call something fashion if you cannot wear it without help....." and I don't think this falls under goth-loli nor death metal nor punk. It was obviously a real straitjacket. "I guess someone who's a great detective always has a screw loose, after all....."

I earnestly thought.

I guess I have yet quite a ways to go in sharpening my senses.....

"That said, perhaps Rizumu-chan isn't wearing that clothing of her own will," Kasugai-san suddenly began speaking in a stern, professor-like voice. "It may be child abuse."

".....Abuse."

Child abuse.

Abuse.

Those words felt like cold steel.

To the point where I didn't want to imagine anything related.

".....By who?"

"By Ikki."

"Why!?"

"Anyone looking at this scene would think the same."

"Guh....."

Shit.

This person is too funny.

A live-in biology scientist and a straitjacket girl.

I could no longer decide what to be more confused about. Perhaps I should call Hime-chan for help... wait, what point is there in adding more fools to the scene?

Help, Mikoko-chan! Help, Shito-kun!

"Ikki is such a boring man," Kasugai-san sighed as she looked down on me. "I wanted you to play the straight man part out beautifully there."

"Shut up idiot."

"Ikki is a boring man, so you aren't allowed to say anything other than a straight man's line from now on."

"Why!?"

"....."

"....."

"....."

"Alright, then I shall focus on being the straight man... wait, why!?" I played the straight man once, and then. ".....wait, why, why!?"

"You pass."

Kasugai-san gave me a thumbs up.

"Keep at it and aim for Oogaki-kun's level."

"So you turned him into that....."

Kasugai Kasuga's animal training lesson.

As if.

And then.

That was when.

"Mm... mmmm."

While we were fooling around, the girl, Rizumu-chan, turned over in her sleep. It looked like she might be awakening.

"Fufufu. This is your time to shine. What sort of excuse will Ikki come up with?"

"....."

I'll have to think about how to kick this person out later.

I thought maybe I shouldn't be too close by when she woke up, so I slid away from Rizumu-chan. I saw that Kasugai-san wasn't moving from her current position, so I hid behind her. Kasugai-san was a bit taller than me.

"You coward."

"Call me what you want."

"You child-abusing pervert."

"Am not."

Niounomiya Rizumu opened her eyes.

".....Mmm. Nya."

She raised her small body. She did it easily despite being unable to use her arms. And then Rizumu-chan looked in Kasugai-san's (and my) direction.

And then she tilted her head to the side.

Her large, black and white eyes.

Just stared.

Purely inquisitive.

Strange.

Weird.

Surprise.

Suspicion.

Caution.

And then, fear.

"Uuuuuu---"

She began winding up.

"Uukyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

A glass-shattering shriek.

With tears produced by scream!

Shit! It's all over!

This is where the User of Nonsense ends!

Thank you for reading!

"It's, it's, it's sushi!"

".....Huh?"

"Thank you for the meal!"

With the force of a starved beast, Rizumu-chan began gorging on the platter of sushi. Without the use of her arms, she looked like a dog, but she ate with such ferocity that I could not even comment on how it was rude of her.

"Ah! The eggs are mine!"

Kasugai-san hurriedly shouted, after skipping a beat.

Now that I think about it, this was the first time I have ever heard this person raise her voice... and that was when I finally thought, are you really using your savings on this?

How wasteful.....

"....."

I had nothing to do and nothing to say, so I simply stood quietly and watched this manteau-wearing great detective and apron-wearing biology scientist fight over sushi.

Fade out.

3

"I'm Niounomiya Rizumu!"

Rizumu-chan bowed her head.

Rizumu-chan, myself, and Kasugai-san sat facing each other in a triangle. As we were in such a small room, it was like we were sitting at separate corners. Rizumu-chan had taken off her black manteau and folded it at the side of the room, so now she was only in the one-piece straitjacket. Although it was evening, the Kyoto night wasn't particularly cool. Or rather, Kyoto feels much more like summer during the night. However, I also feel that it's cruel to place the blame solely on Kyoto for the damp, overbearing air I currently suffocated in.

"Sixteen years old! A great detective!"

"....."

"I see. I'm Kasugai Kasuga. A biology professor."

Kasugai-san answered without missing a beat and extended her right hand. Rizumu-chan, with her arms strapped, simply smiled. It was an incredibly innocent smile, one that insinuated being out of touch with reality.

"This person is Ikki. A user of nonsense."

"Please don't just go ahead and introduce others."

"And so."

Rizumu-chan switched expressions and looked at us. I could almost sense a bit of weight behind that look, allowing me to nod my head at her self-proclaimed great detective-ness. If only she didn't have so many grains of rice stuck around her mouth.

"Why am I in a place like this?"

She asked.

.....But even if you asked me.

This is a critical problem.

Because I would like to ask that too.

I would like to ask God.

God, are you stupid?

"My my, don't call it a place like this. After all, it's my home you know?"

"It's not your home," I said. "Kasugai-san. You're simply complicating things, so please shut up for a while."

"I want to make things complicated."

"Shut up. I'll kill you." I looked away from Kasugai-san and faced Rizumu-chan. And then I used the high-level technique of lying without falsifying the truth. "As for the question of why you're here in a place like this... well, that nice lady over there wasn't able to leave you alone lying around like that and picked you up."

"Lying around!" Rizumu-chan looked surprised. "W- where? Where was I lying around this time?"

This time?

This time means there was a last time.

I cocked my head to the side and looked at Kasugai-san.

"Where was she lying around?"

"Below the bridge near Kamogawa Park."

She answered. Saying Kamogawa Park didn't narrow the area down any given its size, but that aside, that's quite the distance to go for a walk.

Well, I suppose the strange behavior of this person has quite some reach.

She has nothing to do anyways.

"Ah, I see I see," Rizumu-chan nodded in acceptance. "Well then, thank you very much! I love you, Onee-san!"

And her graciousness was very friendly and intimate. But it wasn't a bad feeling to see a girl filled with energy. This world has been filled with many sarcastic brats of late, after all.

"Please, it's nothing to thank me over. I simply did what's normal for a civilized human being," Kasugai-san said despite undoubtedly not thinking anything of the sort. She was most assuredly one of those sarcastic brats in her day.

"By the way, if I may ask, what sort of profession is a great detective?"

And then she continued with a question in which she undoubtedly had no interest.

She was obviously just having fun.

"Fufun."

Rizumu-chan proudly smiled.

"Well, I would describe it as mental labor."

"Wow."

Kasugai-san tried to sound amazed.

It reeked of a bluff.

"But if I were to say one thing, a great detective isn't a profession, Onee-san, Onii-san. A great detective is a way of life!"

Rizumu-chan smiled, showing off.

Oh no, she's an idiot.

She said a way of life.

"That's cool, very cool, very cool. A way of life. I admire those things," Kasugai-san was into this now, acting out a personality that made no sense. "By the way, what is that straitja-mgh."

I hurriedly, with my body and soul, rushed over and smothered Kasugai-san's mouth.

Phew, that was close.

Idiot, how could you be asking such a pointed question so easily? How dense can you be? What happens if she truly were a victim of child abuse? What would you do then?

"What's wrong?"

"No, no, nothing, nothing. I just suddenly wanted to do a pro wrestling move... hey, Kasugai-san, please don't lick my finger!"

I reflexively let Kasugai-san go. W- what's this feeling going through my body? All she did was lick my fingertip... I ended up glaring at Kasugai-san, who in turn stuck her tongue out through her thin lips, and then shot me a seductive look.

Scary!

Kasugai Kasuga, seriously scary!

".....Umm. Now that we know where you were found knocked out, could you tell us why you were lying there? Was it related to being a detective?"

"Not a detective, a great detective!"

She corrected that slight difference.

She appears to have an odd fixation.

"Now. As for why, yeah, I was probably starving. When I'm concentrating, I forget to eat. I was probably pretty wobbly because I hadn't eaten in three days."

"....."

That explains her appetite.

I see.

"However, *probably* seems pretty vague."

"I lose consciousness a lot. Habitually losing consciousness, or something? Sometimes I wake up in a place I don't recognize, in a town I don't recognize, and my memory is gone. It always happens."

".....Huh?"

That.....

That's pretty dangerous, is it not?

Does that mean she has... an illness?

Nar- something, that sleepiness illness, that I forget the name of.

"But this is the first time I woke up and found delicious sushi right in front of me. Geez, thanks for the meal. I love sushi!"

"No no, think nothing of it," Kasugai-san answered matter-of-factly. "Don't worry about paying for it either."

"Ahah, lady, you're just as kind as you look. I love you! But I can't just accept that... ah, that reminds me!" Rizumu-chan stood up abruptly as if going *gasp*! "My, my wallet is gone!"

"That would be right here. It was in the pocket of your manteau," Kasugai-san handed her the wallet. I say handed, but Rizumu-chan grabbed

it in her mouth. She must have -7 lifestyle points. "It was dangerous so I hung onto it. I know it's rude, but I also wanted to know your name."

"Why thank you... Hey, it's empty!" Rizumu-chan wailed. "Stolen again! There was 30,000 yen this time too! Only coins and my business card are left!"

"Poor soul. It must have been stolen while you were knocked out."

Kasugai-san said with an expression filled with sympathy.

I looked at the sushi platter that was as empty as the wallet. I confirmed the name of the store engraved with green.

Hmm, this store, with this platter, with this amount, would be roughly 30,000 yen.....

Special income.

That meant a special source of income.

Special as in not normal.

"....."

Are you a demon?

I'll say it however many times.

Are you a demon!?

".....Well, I was able to eat some sushi, so I'll give up on that," said Rizumu-chan even though she was clearly still affected and then she headed toward her folded manteau. "And because there's no need to stay, I thought I should begin my retreat."

"Is that so."

".....Huh. I wonder where to stay tonight....."

"Stay, you mean you don't live around here?"

"I'm a wanderer from one journey to the next."

"Wanderer?"

"Romanticist."

Ah.

Come to think of it, the name on her business card wasn't something I recognized as being in Kyoto. I don't remember where that postal code was

for, either. Given her profession (way of life) as a great detective, from one journey to the next must refer to being away from home often.

"You should divide risks if you're journeying. Like keeping at least three wallets on you. I did that while coming to Kyoto myself."

Kasugai-san did not hesitate in offering advice, as though she had experienced it herself. I will never again trust this person.

"....."

Running out of funds in the middle of a trip is quite alarming.

".....Onii-san."

"Yes, what is it?"

I defaulted to a polite tone.

"Could you put my manteau on me?"

".....Yes."

Commenting is forbidden.

I picked up the manteau and like the top-class butler Sebastian (made-up name), I put the manteau back on Rizumu-chan. "Thank you," she bowed her head. Even after raising her head again, perhaps subconsciously, her back still dropped.

Pitiful.

It was too pitiful.

It was so pitiful, it was like the king of pitiful.

More than anything, the lack of recognition of one's own pitiful state was what was definitively pitiful. These are the sorts of people that become abused by the powers that be in human society. "Huh? I can't find it anymore, oh well."

.....

I could no longer contain my guilt.

"..... Rizumu-chan. Do you want me to lend you some money?"

"Really!?"

Rizumu-chan spun around.

"Yes... although I don't have much to spare."

"Thank you! Onii-san, I love you!"

Thud!

Rizumu-chan charged into me for a hug. Obviously because she could not use her arms, it simply turned into a bodyslam. It was a surprisingly heavy blow, and as a result I crashed into the wall behind me.

It kinda hurt.

"Ah... are you ok?"

".....Yes."

I took my wallet out of my back pocket and transferred 30,000 yen exactly to Rizumu-chan's wallet. While that constituted this month's living expenses, and while I wasn't living a particularly financially sound life, and while while while, I could not worry about that right now. I placed 30,000 yen in Rizumu-chan's manteau pocket.

"And Rizumu-chan, you should not casually say you love people."

"? Why?"

"Because fondness leads to being taken advantage of. Well of course, that's different if you yourself intend to take advantage of people that way."

"? .....Yes. I don't really get it, though."

"You say such dark things to innocent girls, Ikki. This is why I hate realists," Kasugai-san spread her arms out and shook her head in an exaggerated motion, as if sighing and saying geez, like a foreign host of a sales channel.

"....."

While I would normally agree with such an opinion, even so I could hold my head high knowing that I was a better human being than her.

"Okay. Got it!"

And you shouldn't be agreeing with her.

"Well then well then well then, I'm glad to have been in your care, Onii-san, Onee-san!"

"Yes. Feel free to stop by if you ever need help."

"I'm telling you to shut up."

"I'll still be in Kyoto for a while for work, so if we have a connection, let us meet again. I just arrived, so I still have to figure out a hotel and such, though."

".....Sure," I nodded. "If we have a connection."

If we have a connection.

Who said that?

Right, Assistant Professor Kigamine.

"If we meet again, I'll pay you back."

"No, don't worry about that. You can forget we exist. That said, what do you mean by for work?"

Was that not a way of life.

"Kufufu. Right now, I'm..."

Rizumu-chan said.

"Looking for a man named Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"....." "....."

"That's my mental labor right now. I'd like it if Onii-san or Onee-san called me at the number on that business card if you come across anything about Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"In... information....." I eeked out, stunned. "But without knowing what sort of person that is."

"I think you'll recognize him immediately. He has this super flamboyant tattoo on his face. Ah, but I don't think you'll run into him that easily. He's apparently really good at hiding. And he's dangerous, so you shouldn't raise your voice if you see him. Oh yeah, Onii-san, could you give me your contact info?"

"S-sure....."

I instinctively gave Rizumu-chan my cell phone number.

"Hmm. A good number."

"....."

"? What's wrong? That's an interesting expression."

"No, nothing....."

"Mmkay."

Rizumu-chan bowed.

"And with that, I shall take my leave. Farewell, Onii-san, Onee-san!"

Energetic to the end, the self-proclaimed great detective, Niounomiya Rizumu formally bowed, shook her hand, and left the room.

All that remained was silence.

Not even Kasugai-san said anything.

I said nothing either.

Zerozaki.

Looking for... Zerozaki Hitoshiki?

Looking for, she said?

"Zerozaki....." Kasugai-san mumbled after what felt like forever. "That was the name of the person who had infiltrated the Professor's facility last month....."

"Yes....."

And.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki is *exactly* the name of the serial murderer who had indiscriminately killed a total of twelve people in Kyoto in May.

Could it be.....

I didn't think I would encounter that name again in a circumstance like this.

The Human Failure, Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

The demonic child of the Zerozaki family.

The sub-zero blade that murdered as easily as breathing.

".....Even so."

I scratched my head.

There was no actual reason to be nervous. Even if she had come to Kyoto looking for him... there was nothing to be done. I don't think he's in Kyoto anymore, much less even in Japan.

Great Detective, rampaging.

Would it have been better to tell her?

"Hey... Ikki."

Kasugai-san called my name with a solemn look.

".....What do you want."

"Now that I'm full, this lady would like to do some erotic things."

"Do it alone."

August 1, a Monday.

Summer vacation.

A normal day in the life of the User of Nonsense went like this.

CHAPTER 2 — CANNIBAL (CANNIBAL)

0

I won first prize in the lottery.

"What will you buy?"

"Lottery tickets."

1

Phrases that come to mind regarding Aikawa Jun.

Free and uncontrolled. Dissolute and unruly. Broadminded, crude yet strong. Red. Humanity's Strongest Contractor. Someone who accepts any job as long as the money is worth it. Desert Eagle. Ogre Killer. Overkill Red. Sarcastic laugh. Always smiling. A treacherous look. The cynical, twisted speech mannerism. Slanted eyes with the white of her eyes visible between her pupil and eyelids. Stylish suit. Loves making fun of people. Loves fun, loves trouble a lot. Overestimates other people. Pokes her head in when she senses panic and makes things worse. Hates half-assed things. Tall. Does not think about how others feel. Loves manga. Confident. Beautiful. Reliable. Someone you would never want to be an enemy of. Makes you feel invincible when she is an ally, although you will need to prepare payment in kind. An aggressive way of talking and an aggressive attitude. Forceful, unreasonable, selfish. Liar, with no trepidation over fooling others. Witty, although she doesn't make use of it often. Or rather, she prefers violent resolutions. Mesmerizing, charismatic. Age unknown. Probably somewhere in her twenties. Loves cosplay. Drives a bright red cobra. Rides a Ducati, of course (imported), although I have never seen it.

"So? .....What happened after that?"

"What do you mean, after that?"

"That great detective, Niounomiya Rizumu, did you call and tell her? That you're doing something super pointless and stupid, so you look totally stupid and dumb right now."

"No... not really."

"Why? You should've told her."

"It's a pain. And I don't want anything to do with her."

"Really? Looks really fun."

"A little girl who's a great detective while wearing a manteau and a straitjacket and glasses?"

"Looks really fun."

"No thanks. I shall retreat."

"Ah. Got it."

Aikawa-san nodded knowingly.

August 4th.

I was near Shijo Kawaramachi again.

I was having lunch in the spaghetti restaurant above that large bookstore with Aikawa-san, or rather while sitting across from Aikawa Jun.

She invited me out of the blue yesterday.

Like this----

"Yo, Ii-tan. You free tomorrow? Because we're going to lunch."

"Huh? Tomorrow? I need to help Hime-chan with her studies all of tomorrow."

"Hmm. Well, you're free if you cancel that, then."

"....."

"See you then!"

-- Like that.

.....

I'm sorry, Hime-chan.

Aikawa-san was wearing a rather, what would you say, rough style of clothing today. Would you call it a young style, because she was wearing a tight fitting t-shirt with her coat wrapped around her waist, slim jeans that looked like a pain to wear and take off, and instead of her usual high heels, wore sports shoes that resembled sandals except with thick soles, had a bandanna on, and tied her hair back. Everything she wore emphasized red, as usual, but it was almost like she was wearing a disguise.

"Hmm? This outfit? Nah, it's not a disguise or anything. I'm off today and having some private time. So I dressed up to match Ii-tan. Might as well have a day like this once in a while, it being a date and all."

".....This was a date?"

I came here filled with trepidation assuming that she was going to push another ridiculous job onto me. However, now that she mentions it, I could sort of agree with what Aikawa-san said. After all, considering Aikawa-san's normal crimson suit, no one in their right mind would think us a couple... but rather a lady and her servant, or something like that. Well, not that we looked like a fit even with her dressing more normally.

"This isn't half-bad, right?"

"Well, Aikawa-san looks great no matter what you wear, although I did laugh at the nurse outfit you wore once."

".....I said not to call me by my last name. Only enemies call me by my last name. Well, it's getting pretty annoying correcting you all the time. You're quite something to be able to beat me in patience."

After a hundred repetitions, it seemed our common ritual had become perfunctory. Aikawa-san elegantly sipped up her tofu soymilk-cream pasta. Despite her rough look and mannerisms, she was astonishingly well-practiced when it came to etiquette.

She had probably been trained well.

.....

Trained, eh?

"So, Ii-tan."

"Yes?"

"How've you been?"

".....More or less as I just told you. I was invited to a part-time job by the assistant professor and then picked up a great detective and oh, the cast on my left arm finally came off. See, see," I waved my left arm around. "It's not all healed yet, but I have regained some level of freedom."

"What? Oh, your injury from last month. But if you think about it, it's quite a surprise you were able to survive that. You did well, you did well."

".....I suppose. Even I thought I was going to die last month." I crossed my arms after hearing Aikawa-san's thoughts. "....Then again, that incident with Hime-chan the month before that, and the incident with Zerozaki before that, and Wet Crow's Feather Island before that, even though it lead to me getting to know Jun-san, I felt like I was going to die each and every time."

"Ahahah."

Is it something to laugh about?

".....I feel like my life has gone in shambles since meeting Jun-san."

"Your life has always been in shambles. Even before you met me."

Hmm.

It sounded eerily true.

"However, *Niounomiya*, *Niounomiya* Rizumu, *Niounomiya*... you've become acquaintances with quite the name. Your trouble-making is really gaining some shine."

"What's wrong with Niounomiya?"

"Hmm? Wait, you don't know?"

"I know. From the Tale of Genji."

".....Zerozaki Hitoshiki-kun didn't tell you anything?"

"We spoke about a lot, but most of it was just idle chat... why? Is she a person from *that side*? Is there something wrong with *Niounomiya*?"

".....There are things in this world that you're better off not knowing," Aikawa-san said, as she grabbed the check and stood up from her seat. "Let's head out. I left the afternoon all open for Ii-tan."

"That's quite the honor."

"Have anywhere you'd recommend? I come to Kyoto a lot, but I've never really come here to play."

"Hmm," I also stood up from my seat and thought while walking behind Aikawa-san. "And I'm no good at playing. A working man, you might say."

"If you say so."

Aikawa-san paid the check.

Aikawa-san paid for the both of us, obviously.

.....I felt a bit pathetic.

So, where to go from here... bowling or billiards or table tennis... but there's no way for me to beat Aikawa-san in anything related to athletics. It's not like she's my caretaker, so I didn't want to bore her with such an obviously one-sided setup... but to go along with Aikawa-san's hobbies, like what, a manga cafe? There was an offbeat-looking manga cafe near the entrance to Shinkyogoku, but going to a manga cafe for a date is very unromantic and shameful. At the same time, the typical, or expected move of going to Kamogawa and just sitting together seemed wrong too.

"How about a movie, Jun-san?"

"Anything good on right now?"

"No clue. Shall we check it out?"

"Well, nothing wrong with going."

We walked down the stairs past the bookstore and then headed toward the big theater in the vicinity. That said, that theater only plays the major movies, so I don't stop by often... ah, but Aikawa-san likes the stereotypical stuff, so maybe it'll offer a menu to her liking.

However, before we reached the theater, Aikawa-san said "Nevermind," and stopped walking.

"Huh?"

"I came out to Kyoto, so why should I go watch a movie? Take me to some temple or shrine or something."

"Hmm....."

What a whimsical person.

The closest one from here would be Honnouji... but there was a part of me that didn't want to lead someone to a place I had not been to myself. But, being a resident of Kyoto myself, I didn't know much about the sightseeing locations. When I first came here, Miiko-san guided me around some places, so I suppose I will have to choose from that set.

Seimei Shrine... Philosophy Road... Nijo Castle... all far.

Enryakuji... that is even further.

Yasaka Shrine... Kiyomizu Temple, that was about it.

"Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu Temple, which do you prefer?"

"Hmm. Kiyomizu Temple."

"Kiyomizu Temple."

"I want to jump off the Kiyomizu stage."

"Please don't."

"I'm kidding."

"....."

Of all people, you're very likely to do it.

So please don't.

"Understood then. I must say that it's not far, but it is a bit of a walk."

"No prob, I like walking."

"Speaking of which, where's your Cobra today?"

"Being worked on. Sadly, it broke. I guess I made it go through a lot up to now. So I came here by taxi today."

"Huh."

"Taxis are easy and nice, but it pisses me off not being able to drive myself."

"Are you the type that can't leave things to others? I don't understand that sentiment myself. Well, Jun-san's job is more to make other people handle things, as opposed to delegating... well, this way."

I began walking ahead of Aikawa-san, to guide her.

That reminded me.

It was so obviously obvious that I had not ever thought about it, but Aikawa-san doesn't live in Kyoto. She seems to be jumping around a lot for work, but then, where does Aikawa-san call home?

"Jun-san, do you have a place of residence?"

"Nnya? Residence?"

"Yes. An address where you can be reached."

"Nope. I have a bunch of places here and there where I can hide, but I usually live in hotels. No place I can really call a home ground."

"Huh."

That's quite the gorgeous life.

".....I thought Ii-tan was like that too. Ii-tan isn't planning on being in Kyoto forever, right? You're not living in that old apartment like you're *at home*, are you?"

"I suppose... I am a rootless blade of grass. But I don't think I'll be leaving Kyoto for as long as Kunagisa is here. Unless something serious happens."

"Hmm. Unless something happens, eh. I see, I see."

Aikawa-san nodded in understanding.

Though I did not get what she understood.

We backtracked all the way to Kawaramachi Street and then walked south. If we made a turn at Shijou Street, we would run into Yasaka Shrine which could be a bit of a cold shower, so it would be better to take a left turn a bit further down. Hmm, that is a thought, to stop by Yasaka Shrine on the way back.

"*Niounomiya*, you see."

Aikawa-san suddenly said, en route.

"You could call them a professional killer group."

".....Professional killer?"

That was quite a non-ordinary word.

Though I suppose one could call it a common one too.

At the very least, it wasn't a word used by this side.

"Yup, the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe. They're quite the name on that side of the world. Quite the *name*... hahah, yep."

".....But it's not that rare a name is it? It could be just a coincidence," I said. "That girl, no matter how you looked at her, did not seem a professional killer at all. Well, not that she seemed like a great detective either, but I cannot believe her to be a professional killer. I can figure that much, from her mannerism."

"Mannerism. Come to think of it, the name *Rizumu* sounds familiar too," Aikawa-san continued. "What was it... umm. Rizumu the *Carnival*... or was it Rizumu the *Man Eater*?"

"That sounds rather flippant."

"I don't know much about them. They're a group of unidentified people to begin with, and I go out of my way to avoid the professional killer groups as much as possible. All of those groups are filled with oddly messed up perverts. That world moves under a totally different set of rules. I'd fall apart if I spent too much time with them."

Mmm.

Well, Rizumu-chan was indeed a strange girl.

A curious girl, I suppose.

But nowadays, one could say that such a girl was no longer much of a rarity anymore. After all, these are the times we live in. As someone who knows Kunagisa and Hime-chan and others, Rizumu-chan did not seem abnormal enough to warrant an instruction manual.

"That said, a *Great Detective*... the Niounomiya Troupe starting a detective agency, that's pretty funny, but what do you think?"

"Don't ask me. Although, I still think they might just happen to have the same name. It may not be at the level of Suzuki or Satou, but it's not that rare a name, right?"

"Hmmmm. Well, that's true... Usually this sort of thing is just worrying too much. But this is you. Well, whatever the case, you should rip up and toss

that business card. And change your cell phone number. You don't want trouble knocking on your door, do you?"

"Well... I've begun to think I should just accept that side of things."

"Oh dear. A change in dogma?"

"I think it's important for people to know when to give up."

"Ah, so you've accepted it. Is that because of what happened last month?"

"There was last month and I'm half-living with Kasugai-san right now. When you look at people like that, you start to realize you're totally irrelevant, someone totally low level."

"Kasugai Kasuga. Hmph, to think that she would show up again... an unpredictable turn of events if you want to call it that. Although she's like you in that you're both totally unpredictable."

"Please stop. I don't want to think of myself as the same type of character as her."

"Hmm....." Aikawa-san thought for a moment. "....But Kasugai Kasuga... she probably isn't aimless....."

"In the beginning, she said being with me should be cause for amusement, but I wonder. This is the same for Takatsu University's assistant professor, but I would like for people to not treat me like a radio station."

"Hah. Radio station, that's a good one."

Aikawa-san smirked.

"Incidentally, does Kunagisa know? That the person who can be read Kasugai from either direction is here in Kyoto."

"Of course I wouldn't tell her."

"Cheater. Scum of man. Man of scum."

"That hurts, making it sound like I'm doing wrong," I said. "Kunagisa and I are long past that point. It's over between us. We are just friends now. Friends. A pure, platonic relationship in which each party respects the other but doesn't allow ego to get in the way."

"My my, a pure relationship. That sounds like nothing less than a coward's excuse." Aikawa-san gently rubbed at where it hurt. "I wonder if it's alright to be dawdling along like so."

"It is, of course. The world only goes the way it wants to."

"***Only goes... the way it wants to***," Aikawa-san repeated my words, like a cough. "*As* like **if you're alive**, **you'll die**... **researching not dying**. Well, it's an old theme, that's for sure. Immortality and Everlasting Youth have been the homework of kings from ancient times. Weren't they doing something similar at the ER3, what with everything they do?"

"Who knows," I concealed. "I couldn't tell just by reading the papers the assistant professor gave me. It was like she was just warming up the tea... well, not that it's surprising that she did not give me much, considering that I had yet to actually accept the invitation."

"So what're you going to do?"

".....Hmm."

I paused for a moment and then answered.

"Well, I might as well accept, I suppose."

"Oh, you'd already decided."

"Yes... I'm still hesitant, but eighty percent."

"So, what? Curious about researching not dying?"

"There's that," I replied. "An apartment neighbor is having some financial problems. Needing 2000 this month. I've been in their care so much that I thought I could chip in."

I didn't receive a response, so I glanced at Aikawa-san and found her to be staring at me with eyes wide open, like she had been summoned to the afterlife.

.....This was quite the rare expression.

"Huh? What what? What's going on?" Aikawa-san leaned in to me, and with practiced form, instantly put me in a headlock. "Why's that happening? What's going on for you to be trying to help someone?"

"Ah... no, it's not that big of a deal," I answered, flustered. This reaction was unexpected. I didn't realize I was looked upon as being so apathetic, not that I blame her. Also, breasts. Your breasts are touching, Aikawa-san. "Returning the favor, just returning the favor. It's unpleasant to leave debts unpaid."

".....Mmm," Aikawa-san released me from the headlock after my plain answer. "Mmm... uhhh, is that the one you mentioned before, the samurai-like lady? Asano Takuminokami or something."

"No, her name isn't that flamboyant....."

"You like her?"

Guah.

A fastball.

Right down the middle.

"As much as Jun-san likes me."

I tried swinging a light cross-counter.

"Hmm."

No effect!

If anything, self-destruction!

Self-explosion into a grave hole, no assistance needed!

"You're really hard to figure out. Does being unidentified and inexplicable feel that cool? Not that I care. So, did you tell the assistant professor already?"

"Mm, no, not yet. I need to decide on one, two, or three more monitors."

"How many have you decided on, other than that samurai?"

"No, I am not inviting the samurai."

".....Hypocrite."

"Call me as you wish," I shrugged. I was becoming accustomed to being the villain, so I paid it no heed. "Well, I tried inviting the apartment's witch."

"Witch?"

"There's one. Named Nanananami Nanami."

"Hmm. You know a lot of people. So, what happened?"

"'What? Why do I have to do work? My name's Nanananami Nanami, don't you know?' "

"....."

Aikawa Jun went silent.

Yes, indeed.

The Worst Witch, Nanananami Nanami.

While prefacing everything by saying that I wouldn't like to turn out like her, I feel that if I had even a tenth of her ego, my life would change quite a bit, and in that sense I cannot help but feel a sense of respect toward her.

"So, then I tried inviting Teruko-san."

"Woah! So what happened?"

"'Kyuiiii~! Teruko is happy!' Actually it didn't even get that far, she declined before I even invited her."

"I see."

"So I'm stuck."

"You don't know a lot of people."

You only invited two people, she laughed.

Well, of course I'd be laughed at.

I could try inviting classmates, but there was that thing in May, and I felt some sort of resistance to inviting truly ordinary newbies. And I didn't know if I could trust them.

People that I could trust,

Do they exist in this world?

Or rather, what does it mean to trust?

That you would be okay with them betraying you?

That you would be okay with entrusting them with responsibility?

"Ah, I know. Aikawa-san, would you like to tag along?"

"Hmm? I don't mind, but when was it?"

"From the 22nd of August."

"Uhh. Ah, then nope. I've got a job then."

"I see."

"The second half of August is gone."

"Shame."

"It feels like there's been a bunch of stuff going down here and there these days. I don't know why, but there's a lot of trouble going on, a boom in work big enough to make bamboo go extinct... but something feels off."

"Huh. Sounds rough."

Come to think of it.

Making Humanity's Strongest Contractor work for a week for not even 1000 was pretty terrifying.

"But I do need to call Assistant Professor Kigamine soon, given that it's almost a week beforehand....."

"Kigamine?" Aikawa-san said flippantly and continued. "Kigamine? Kigamine, you said? Just now?"

"Eh? Uh, did I say that? That's the name of the employer. Kigamine Yaku. Not the part of famine (飢餓) that's not starving (飢), but rather the tree (木) from Utsurigi (兎吊木) and the congratulations (賀) from Happy New Years (賀正), with the peak (峰) of Mine Fujiko (峰不二子 from Lupin III), and the approximation (約) of reducing fractions (約分). Ah, by reducing fractions I don't mean translations (訳文)."

"Kigamine... Yaku."

"Do you know her?"

Well, according to Mikoko-chan, she's supposedly famous. Though I don't know if that famous refers to within the school, or within some larger scope.

".....No. I don't....."

Aikawa-san narrowed her eyes and stopped, yet slowly, her eyes sharpened. She didn't have kind eyes to begin with, so when Aikawa-san narrowed her sanpaku eyes, it became difficult to look at her directly.

"I don't know... I don't know, I think... but I feel like I've heard that before... no, did I see? Mmm... mm?" Aikawa-san began mumbling.

"Kigamine, Kigamine... it's not that common a name, so I wouldn't forget if something happened....."

"....."

"Hey, Ii-tan. Don't you think it'd be better to turn that part-time down?" Aikawa-san turned to me. "I've got a weird, bad feeling about it. I can give you 200,000 yen, if that's what you need."

"No, I can't accept that."

"I can introduce you to another job, then."

"I swear to god I would rather you not."

"Mmm... you're right. You're right, but I guess it's better to take on this fuzzy feeling head-on instead of running....."

"....."

No, I don't intend to head into a part-time job with such a manly outlook.

"Ii-tan, you can pick anyone else for that *monitor* job you're trying to fill, right?"

"As long as it's someone who I can trust, apparently anyone."

"Then take Ichihime."

".....Eh? Hime-chan?"

"Yeah," Aikawa-san nodded. "At the very least, if she's with you, the worst won't happen. She's pretty much invincible when it comes to the math of combat."

Of course, she's no match for her.

Aikawa-san didn't forget to add.

Indeed, what with being titled the last apprentice of *Zig Zag*, that was true. The only other person to have cornered Hime-chan was the Strategist. She was more than good enough to be a bodyguard. However, was it truly alright to bring a happy-go-lucky high school girl (who was failing every class) into a serious university research study.....

"Ichihime's supplementary classes were until the 20th, right? Then she's free for working part-time from the 22nd. She'll make it."

"Indeed... but I feel hesitant to eat up over half of Hime-chan's remaining ten days of free time--"

"Who cares. She's gonna be bored, anyways. I'm the one with the bad feeling about this, so I'd usually be the one to come along, but obligations in the fleeting world are pretty strict and it's something I can't get out of."

"I see. I see... then, I understand. I will ask her."

Hime-chan.

.....She is a nice girl and all.

But I have trouble dealing with her.

Because that girl is somewhat like Kunagisa.

Bright and serious but careless, innocently direct.

To be honest, a complete opposite of myself.

".....There's just something," Aikawa-san said, with some exasperation. "I'm worrying for you, but you're lacking in the tension department."

"Huh? Ah, me?"

"You. What's with that? Aren't you worrying over something totally different from what I'm warning you about? That assistant professor might be something seriously dangerous, you know? It was the same when I was telling you about Niounomiya earlier, you need to learn to have some tension toward life, or rather a sense of danger, you know? Have you never thought that you'd die?"

"Like I said, I have long ago come to accept that."

"Come to accept that, eh... you sure you're not mixing that up with averting your eyes from the problem? Researching not dying is good and all, but human beings can't actually escape from dying, you know?"

"Who knows."

"Well, I guess that's just how you are. But it's like, do you actually have a sense of composure?"

"Composure?"

"Not so much composure and more reserve strength. You're concealing your true strength at some level, right? It's not like you've given up or that

you’ve accepted things, nothing that simple. But that you want to live life at seventy-percent power. Seventy percent... no, more like sixty percent, about that much."

".....I wonder. From my perspective, as the one you’re talking about, I feel like I’m barely hanging onto life."

"In all cases, your own perspective is always skewed. And that just sort of looks timid, like you’re afraid of going all out, like you’re afraid of clearly looking at your upper limits, but you know, even though we're on different vectors, in that sense, I’m not really one to talk."

"? What do you mean by that?"

"Because. I can’t get serious."

Aikawa-san said, in a rare moment of self-deprecation, although she still had that cynical smirk.

"In that sense, being the strongest is pretty boring, on paper. You can’t battle when there’s no opponent. Not having an enemy is a bad way to sit. That’s why I always have to climb into someone’s ring. I have to play by their rules. But at the end of the day, that’s still just making a mockery of them by handicapping yourself, you know? Being so much stronger and invincible is cheating. Cheating and boring."

"....."

"Well, you know... we mentioned him just now, but the one that was just like you, who showed up in May. Zerozaki Hitoshiki-kun. He was pretty good, relatively speaking. At the very least, he was the best of late."

"Of late... then who was the best one, in the past? There was someone better than Zerozaki?"

"Hmmmm... there was," Aikawa-san hesitated. "However, that was before I was the strongest. There were two, when I was a kid, that I surrendered to, thinking there’s no way I’ll ever beat this guy."

"Two."

That’s surprising.

At the same time, that should be expected. Aikawa-san wasn't *Humanity's Strongest Contractor* from the moment she was born.

Everyone has a past.

Everyone.

Whether necessary or unnecessary.

Whether favorably or unfavorably.

They arrive at the present, having stacked pasts together.

They reach the future by stacking presents together.

"Boring inside....."

"Yeah. It might just be me persuading myself to feel that way, but that's a long time ago... that Zerozaki-kun isn't a candidate anymore, either. That offbeat great detective isn't it, and that guy isn't around anymore."

"Is not around anymore, you say."

"In that sense, Ii-tan."

Plop.

She placed a hand on my shoulder.

And then she gripped it tightly.

Powerfully. Without consideration or mercy.

"I've got high hopes for you."

".....Please."

I answered with a trembling voice.

My voice wasn't all that trembled.

"Stop with the jokes, Jun-san."

"I told you once... right now, it's definitely a joke. So that it's nothing that you've got to worry about," Aikawa-san let go of my shoulder without much resistance. "But I want to see it once, myself... your seriousness. That's terrifying and truth be told, it might be better to take you out before you ever pull out that seriousness."

She did, indeed, tell me that once.

That if I were to ever find a goal.

And if I were to ever work seriously toward that goal.

What would happen.

Happen?

"……That is impossible."

"Hmm?"

"Because this is how I am. Vague and half-assed and helpless. I'm not referring to that conversation about Kasugai-san, but really, I have no goal in life, just a person wobbling about life."

"A clear explanation," Aikawa-san giggled, heehee. "Sounds about right. But if you ask me, not living seriously, regardless of how others feel, has to be really boring for the person."

"Even if I had any reserve strength, that is the type of reserve strength that is too much for me to handle. One shall not touch overwhelming power, or something like that. Something like how human beings only use thirty percent of their brain and when you actually do try to use the rest, it turns out to be a pile of junk….."

"Even if it's a pile of junk, you've gotta use it when you've gotta use it. That'' how reserve power works. You won't be able to stay that vague, half-assed way forever."

Aikawa-san resurrected my words.

And then, she declared.

"Because you're living."

2

We made the rounds at Kiyomizu Temple and Yasaka Shrine and then ate dinner at Aikawa Jun's preferred sake bar and then spoke a bit afterwards, went around a bit, and then repeated taking breaks and walking around and then once it passed midnight, in other words once it became August 5th, Aikawa-san hopped on a taxi, and we went our separate ways. It seemed she had really only opened the afternoon, and so she was heading off to work without taking a break.

She's quite swamped with work, I thought.

I wonder when she sleeps.

"....."

And then I wondered.

Why was Aikawa-san working as a contractor? With her talents... no, you cannot sum it up as simply talents, that person, Aikawa Jun *as an entity* could do whatever she wanted to do and could attain anything she wanted to attain.

Living yet not *dying*.

Perhaps she could even pull that off.

At the very least, that is how absolute she was.

That impression.

Yet, why was she working as a contractor?

A contractor is simply a proxy for someone else's work.

An agent.

A replacement.

A substitute.

Why was she satisfied with that?

The same lady who was so insistent that other people be serious.

The same lady who said she wanted to see me being serious.

The same lady who said she had high hopes for me.

Is she not being contradictory?

Cannot become serious.

Means the same, verbally.

But they refer to a different spectrum, a spectrum too far off.

I cannot be serious.

She cannot become serious.

.....That difference is enormous.

That difference is absolute.

That is the difference between the strongest and the weakest.

Even though one cannot necessarily call them totally separate.

".....That's right."

I had never thought about it.

I never wanted to think about it.

As for Aikawa-san.

"As for Aikawa-san... what is she really after?"

Or perhaps, what is it she really doesn't want?

Maybe I should ask her next time.

If the chance were to arise.

If I remember, until the next time we meet.

".....Well, time to go home."

I turned around. As a broke university student, I didn't have the financial wherewithal to do something as bourgeois as taking a taxi. Yet at the same time, there were no buses anymore at this hour. In conclusion, I was to walk home. There was nothing to think about in particular, and it was a bit pathetic that I was doing the same thing as when I still wore the cast.....

"Ah... this sucks."

After being swung around by Aikawa-san for 12 straight hours, I was exhausted. I could call Miiko-san and ask for her to pick me up, but I didn't feel up to that either. And, at this hour, Miiko-san might already be asleep. I didn't want to wake her up.

I leisurely walked along Oike Street. Come to think of it, when was it that I walked around Kyoto at night like this with Zerozaki? Where were we headed then?

It was a pretty long time ago.

A lot of people died then too.

Enough to make me numb to it.

To make me feel apathetic.

To feel resigned about it, to erase it from my memory.

"Although it's all nonsense....."

Telling me that I'm living.

Me, the one that's living like I'm already dead.

"Living... dying....."

Kigamine Yaku.

Researching not dying.

Of course, that is just a metaphor, and just the assistant professor's way of concealing her thoughts. After all, anything related to medical studies is researching not dying, anyways. Liberal arts people like myself have a hard time distinguishing between biology and health science. However, Miyoshi Kokoromi, once my teacher, studied death. From that perspective, researching not dying wasn't exactly out of the blue for me and could actually be somewhat familiar.

However... is that enough of a reason?

To be poking my head into that?

According to Aikawa-san, there was something that gave her an uneasy feeling, something that was uncertain, and so the right thing to do would be to back off.

".....But it's the same either way."

It was always like that. Everything should and would, at the end of the day, resulted in the same regardless of how much I regretted or repented for things.

The future was the same either way.

Going to hell, or retreating to hell.

That was my life.

Following destiny.

Guided by causality.

"In the end, everything *goes the way it wants to go*....."

And.

I ran into the stoplight at Korikawa Street and when I stopped walking, at the end of the very long walkway, I noticed a humanoid shadow. Despite the fact that Kyoto turns into a rural prefecture once you get away from the central city, it wasn't that I found it odd considering that you typically don't see a dog much less a person at night. Even in a rural area, you'll sometimes see one or two people taking a walk at night.

No, the problem was that the figure at the other end of the walkway wasn't actually walking, but rather lying face down on the yellow tiling.

20/20 vision.

Is it someone collapsed?

".....Hmm."

It wasn't necessarily because I had just been thinking of Zerozaki, but what crossed my mind was what happened in May. I found myself in a similar situation then and I lent a hand and ended up all the worse for it.

Not that it would necessarily happen again.

.....

Now then.

I could get back to my apartment without passing through this stoplight.....

"Or are you saying that you could ignore someone collapsed on the ground and go on your merry way?"

Yes, yes.

Leaving Kasugai-san's words aside.

If you were to ask if the guy who was just talking to Aikawa-san moments earlier could ignore a person collapsed on the ground, the answer would be no.

I didn't wait for the stoplight to turn green and jogged. Hardly any cars were on the street at this hour, anyways.

"Are you alright-?"

And as I got closer to that figure.

I froze.

".....Are yoooooou allllllriiiiiiight....."

A dark manteau.

Both arms hidden under the manteau.

Long hair, glasses.

It was Niounomiya Rizumu-chan.

"....."

Collapsed on the ground again....

This girl, she collapsed on the ground again!

I crouched close by for inspection and she looked the same as before, just sleeping. No, not just looked the same, she was even making the "zzz nom nom" sleeping sounds and then finishing it off by rolling over and mumbling. It reminded me of a salaryman dead drunk on the ground.

Uwah.....

It was like, you know.

At the very least, fate did want us to meet again.

"I want to run....."

I don't want this sort of connection is what I wanted to say.

But you know.

Even if it is Kyoto in the dead of a summer night.

It being a girl and all.

"....."

Niounomiya.

A professional killer group.

I felt apologetic toward Aikawa-san, but even on a second look, she looked nothing of the sort. Leaving her thoughts about Assistant Professor Kigamine's research on not dying aside, I didn't feel this one warranted that sort of caution.

Sure.

I'm used to dealing with weirdos.

She couldn't be any worse than Tamamo-chan.

".....But it's not like I can carry her on my back."

Kasugai-san had picked up Rizumu-chan on the first of August and today is the third. She had said at the time, *I hadn't eaten in three days*, so perhaps she collapsed under the same circumstances. Then again, did she not say she had a habit of losing consciousness? If that's true, then the first place I should take her is the hospital. But that comes with the same problem as taking her to the police... those being a *Great Detective* and the *straitjacket*.

In any case, I should start with slapping her cheeks.

Just as I reached out to her face with that thought.

Fwip.

Like a coiled spring, Rizumu-chan's body snapped up, and as if to avoid my hand, jumped away three meters in less than an instant. That was incomparable even to the agility she showed in lunging for the sushi the other day.

And the eyes looking here were wide open.

Wide enough that I thought maybe even the pupils were open.

".....Eh?"

"....."

Rizumu-chan stared at me with oppressive silence.

And then I realized.

Maybe it was because I tried to slap her cheek?

"Ah, that was just... wanting to--"

The moment I tried to make an excuse, no, by the time I started, as if she had rocketpacks on her legs, she had already closed the three-meter gap. That too made her body tackle the other day look like child's play. Her momentum was so great that her manteau ripped off and fell to the ground.

And revealed her straitjacket.

And she, with both arms sealed by the belts.

Had her mouth wide open, aimed at my throat.

".....Eek."

I thought I was going to be eaten.

Aikawa-san's words flew through my mind.

Carnival. *Man Eater*.

Cannibal.

"*Tsuuwaah*!

Even before I could call it dodging, propelled almost by pure primal fear, I tumbled to avoid the attack. Or more accurately, I wasn't able to dodge her incisors, and the tip grazed my right cheek.

A sharp pain.

And a cold feeling, like I had been nicked by a blade.

It wasn't so much that it was painful, so much that it burned.

It wasn't so much that it was hot, so much that it chilled.

"Gyahahah! Gyahahahahahahahah!"

She.

Looked like she was laughing.

"Gyahahahahahahahahahahahahahahah!"

"Hey... wait."

I was already kneeling on the ground. I wouldn't be able to dodge another attack from this posture. Even though it did nothing to separate our distance, I stretched my arms out in front of me, and showed my palms to her.

She turned to look at me.

Blood trickled from her mouth.

My blood.

It was red.

Red, red.

And then she laughed.

Coldly.

"Ri-Ri....."

I finally managed to blurt out.

"Rizumu-chan....."

"---- Oh."

And.

At last, she spoke in human tongue.

"You're the one that helped Rizumu."

".....Huh?"

I was surprised.

I stood up and stepped back from her.

She saw that, and disgustedly, laughed.

"Phew, almost made me eat you by accident... close one, close one. Gimme a break. We're only allowed to massacre for one hour a day."

".....W-what do you mean."

"Gyahaha!"

She roared with laughter.

Probably for no reason.

I was taken aback by her every action.

The way she talked was totally different. Not just her speech mannerism, but her ambiance, the emotions in her eyes, her everything. Who is this? It was as though, as though the only thing that was the same was the vessel, but that the inside had been flipped over completely.

A hallucination.

Is it really?

Who is this?

Her appearance... no.

Is it *her*?

It was like a different person.

Even though it looked like the same exact vessel.

It was like a different person.

That smile.

Those eyes.

".....Ri-Rizumu-chan... right?"

"Hmmm What? Rizumu? Rizumu-chan! Gyahaha! Phew, nice nice what a fun and pleasant and poetic and wonderful mistake! Noooo you're gonna make Rizumu-chan so hot and shivering and paralyzed deep deep down in the bodyyyyyyyy... yeah!!"

And then, roaring laughter.

As if unstoppable, loud laughter.

"Gyahahahahahahaha!"

She was.....

No.

He was.

He was coming closer to me, one step at a time.

As if playing with his prey, as if threatening his prey.

As if having fun, as if being happy.

"Not *now*....." and then he introduced himself. "I'm Nishizono Shinji... not! Gyahahaha!"

"....."

"I'm a professional killer contracted by order! With fourteen holy crosses at my side, I begin executing my errand!" he said, as if *he* were roaring at heaven. "Right now, it's time for Niounomiya Izumu... Izumu the *Man Eater*."

3

By the time I returned to the apartment, all the lights had been turned off and my room was a husk, with Kasugai-san nowhere to be found.

That person was like a phantom.

In her place was one letter.

I was elated that I was finally rid of the person who paid nothing for the food she was eating, but then I read, "I will be going with you to Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku's part-time job so best regards I cannot rob you yet but I'll eventually learn (just kidding. Aren't I cute?) Kasugai-chan @ silver and gold and balls are at any rate peerless PS. Regarding *The North Wind and the Sun*, don't you think you would never actually wear a coat to hide your skin from the sun?" so that woman had read the contents of the envelope, even though I had hidden it. Well, she had seen me come back with it that day, and given her former job, I figured she would eventually find it.

Anyways, that settled the people to bring.

Kasugai Kasuga, Yukariki Ichihime, and then myself.

It was a multi-colored party.

I looked at my watch and it could still be counted as midnight. But I felt these things should be communicated as soon as possible, so I pulled out my cell phone. University faculty hardly ever adhere to day and night cycles, anyways. And she had told me she was fine with being called at night. I figured Hime-chan would be alright with being told after the fact, so I pulled Assistant Professor Kigamine's business card from my wallet and dialed the number on the card.

"....."

I got the answering machine.

CHAPTER 3 — THOUGHTLESS DEPARTURE (DISMEMBERING MISFORTUNE)

0

You're the misfortune of humanity.

1

August 14, Sunday.

Today I cut my hair.

"....."

I stood in front of a mirror, then turned around, then faced the mirror again, and tilted my head to the side.

"Hime-chan... don't you think this is too short? I'm not an athlete or something."

"No no, this is how it is. This is how Hime-chan imagined it turning out."

Hime-chan crisply spun the hair-cutting scissors that we bought from the dollar store around her finger and proudly stuck out her chest.

"Hime-chan always thought Master's hair was too ragged and bothersome and annoying and irritating."

"Is that what you were secretly thinking....."

"From the moment we met."

"And it was your first impression....."

It was too much.

It was simply too much.

"And Master, I already cut your hair, so you'd just be complaining after the fat."

"....."

After the fact... after the fact... given the situation she must mean after the fact.

".....Oh well."

I stood up from the newspaper sprawled out on the ground with my cut hair all over and took off the towel wrapped around my neck. I put my shirt,

which I had taken off to limit the mess, back on and then I turned back to the mirror and stirred up my hair again. Yes, well, it wasn't bad. At the very least, it was certainly no longer bothersome.

"Thank you, Hime-chan. I like it."

"You're welcome."

Shling shling shling, Hime-chan coolly spun the scissors vertically and into her pocket.

"Mufufu, Master definitely looks better with shorter hair."

"To show my gratitude, I will cut Hime-chan's hair next time."

"Nuh-uh, please no. And Master, your gratitude was supposed to be helping with Hime-chan's summer break homework and the extra homework. They're due tomorrow."

"That's right. But Hime-chan, your hair has gotten pretty long too. You haven't gotten it cut for two months, since June, right? That's no good. Girls need to at least get them trimmed."

"Is that sexism?"

"No, not really. I just thought it was getting long."

"It's not getting long, Hime-chan is making it get long. While suffering with how it is. Hime-chan wants an image change for the upcoming winter."

"They say your hair grows longer if you do erotic things. I would gladly help if you so desire."

"How crude....."

She gave me a frosted look.

Hime-chan is rather into chastity.

"But Master. Why'd you suddenly want a haircut? Like an eyedrop from the second story window."

"....."

This one was hard.

So I gave up.

"Umm. See, look at this scar on my face."

"Yes," Hime-chan did as she was told. "Hmm. Umm, was it ten days ago, that after you went on a date with Jun-san, you said you got bit by a dog."

"Yes. This looks almost like a tattoo, doesn't it?"

"Well, until it heals all the way, kinda."

"So if I kept my hair long, my identity would overlap with a certain character. I was filled with self-loathing every time I looked at the mirror these last ten days, so that's why I decided to cut away."

Hime-chan tilted her head to the side.

Well, of course she wouldn't get it.

I had met Zerozaki before I met Hime-chan.

"But Master, is that scar really gonna heal? Shouldn't you go to a hospital?"

"Well, it should heal cleanly because it's shallow. Although for some reason it is healing really slowly, but it should be gone by next month. And even if it doesn't heal all the way, these sorts of scars are a medal of honor for men."

"If you say so. I think that's only for cool guys."

"....."

Are you trying to say something, Hime-chan?

"Anyways. I need to head out now." I grabbed the bag I had prepared beforehand and said to Hime-chan. "You can stay in this room if you want. Apparently Kasugai-san won't be coming back today. See you, make sure to close the doors when you leave."

"Eh... um, Master. What about helping Hime-chan with summer homework and extra homework in exchange for cutting your hair?"

"That was a lie."

"Seriously!"

"Hime-chan has a way to go to believe me so easily. You will suffer in life if you don't become more careful."

"You're unbeatable when you stop caring! Hime-chan wasted an hour on a precious vacation day! The supplementary classes resume tomorrow!"

"Lions drop their children into a bottomless ravine."

"That's just population control!"

"Hey now, Hime-chan. You should be careful with how you talk to me. Despite how I look, they call me rabies at university."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot swim."

"Bungler!"

I left Hime-chan behind in my room as she warbled on in a tearful tone. I walked down the hallway and down the stairs. And then, into the outside world from the apartment.

Koutoumaru-san was doing his noon exercise in the courtyard. Apparently, some dumbbell exercise that was all the rage a long time ago. But apparently the quirk compared to the old fad was that he was using a dumbbell weighing 20kg on either side. He was deftly handling the giant dumbbell like he was just partaking in morning cardio exercises while showing off his naked, tanned upper body.

Summer.

Blue sky.

Muscled old man.

"....."

I decided not to greet him.

Such good weather today.

Such good weather that I could only look at the sky.

I stepped out onto Chuudachiuri Street and then headed toward the parking lot. At the parking lot, Miiko-san had lifted the hood off her Fiat and was working on the engine. Even for an Italian car, the Fiat 500 required a lot of maintenance.

"Mm."

Miiko-san looked cool again today, wearing a sporty, black tank-top and a jinbei up to her waist, with the top tied around her hips. Because of the bright sun, or because she didn't want it to get dirtied by the oil.

"Inoji, heading out?"

"Heading out. To my friend's house."

"A friend?"

"The blue one."

"Ah, uni."

Miiko-san nodded.

I walked to the Vespa parked next to the Fiat and then put on my helmet and goggles. My arm wasn't fully rehabilitated, but I need it to be by the time the part-time job starts on the 22nd. Rehab, rehab.

"Hair."

"Yes?"

"You cut it."

"Oh, yes."

"It doesn't suit you."

Guah.

.....What a downer.

".....Ah, sorry, I messed that up. Let me try again," Miiko-san shook her head. "It suits you."

"....."

I didn't think it was at all possible to mistake *it doesn't suit you* and *it suits you*, but am I allowed to believe that she didn't simply say her first thoughts at first glance?

"Looks cool. Manly. Girl-killer. Beautiful."

"You don't need to force yourself....."

I was beginning to feel as sandy as a desert.

"You got it cut quite a bit. Hou?"

"Hime-chan."

"Well, that'll crush Hou. She always wanted to cut your hair."

"Even I don't want Houko-chan with a blade standing behind me....."

"I see."

Miiko-san understood.

"Miiko-san, what are your plans today?"

"Job hunting."

"I see."

"I may not make it."

"Don't be so depressed."

"Hmm. You're right, the lottery ticket I bought the other day might be a winner."

"Don't be so optimistic."

"You ask for difficult things."

".....I'm sorry."

Incidentally, I still kept my job a secret. Hime-chan and Kasugai-san are also keeping quiet. Leaving embarrassment or possibly surprising her aside, I felt like the first thing that would happen would be a lecture if she were to ever find out. That was why, to try to obfuscate things, I was buying her dinner, or buying her living ware, or paying for her electricity bills, and piling enough dirt to build a mountain of financial help. Although it makes me feel faint thinking about how long it would take. And if that doesn't turn out to be fast enough, then at worst case, I can just make her borrow money from me. Not that I would have any desire to be paid back.

Anyways.

I need to repay Miiko-san.

She helped me quite a bit.

And is still helping me.

That was why.

Before I leave the apartment, before I never return to this apartment, I want to make sure I pay her back for everything she has done for me.

".....Not that I have any plans to."

"? Did you say something?"

"No, no. Anyways, I shall head off now."

"Yes."

"Miiko-san, I love you."

"Love you."

And, onward with the Vespa.

My destination was Shirosaki, the most high-class residential area in Kyoto. It was a leisurely, speed-limit abiding ride on a Sunday in Kyoto, with cars and streetlights everywhere.

"....."

Yesterday, finally, I had my call returned by Kigamine. Exactly ten days after I left a message. Well, I suppose from the perspective of university faculty, that's just how it goes. I hadn't followed up myself, anyways. Leaving Kasugai-san aside, because she has the credentials, I expected to hear something about Hime-chan and her age, but that didn't happen, and I was told the three of us would be fine.

"However"

Kigamine continued.

Even so, she wanted to interview us and run us through a sort of test, myself included, to measure our fit. I figured that to be expected, given the nature of the study. She asked for a preferred date, but because Hime-chan has supplementary lessons filling every day other than Sunday up to the 20th, she could only go today, or the 21st right before we would be heading out. But as it happened, Kigamine turned out to be busy today. We surely couldn't leave things until the day before, so it seemed we wouldn't be able to take the test during the day. It seemed Kigamine was quite busy, so I told her that we could go with whatever suited her best, and so she said let us go with that. As such, we would be taking the test tomorrow evening.

"I apologize for it being so hurried, but that is the only day I am free."

"No, I don't mind. I have nothing to do tomorrow evening, anyways."

"I had already predicted beforehand that you would be free tomorrow evening."

"....."

.....Really.

Are you a prophet?

"Well... then let us go with that."

"Thank you very much. Until tomorrow evening."

Tomorrow, in other words, the evening of the 15th.

Well, leaving aside the possibility of testing on the day before, I couldn't imagine there being alternate subjects this late, so the test itself was probably truly something of a ritual. More an opportunity to meet face-to-face and have a chat, and so unless something serious happens, everyone should be alright.

.....Hime-chan... and Kasugai-san.....

Something serious could happen.

Fit was a word that could hardly be used to describe the two.

".....Ow."

The cut on my cheek hurt from the wind.

The scabs may have torn off.

When scabs tear off, blood flows.

Because I'm alive.

Because I'm apparently alive.

For now.

"It's all nonsense....."

I arrived at Shirosaki in about an hour.

Kunagisa Tomo was absent.

".....A shock."

As I arrived at the thirty-floor, super luxurious mansion, I dialed her cell phone, but she had headed out today. You told me no such thing, I thought for a moment, but I had likewise not said a word about coming to see her, so this sort of happening happens, happenstance.

Of course, if you were to think about it normally, I understand that I should have made an appointment beforehand, but who would think that the little girl who always no matter what takes not a single step out of her house would somehow be out of her house the moment I decide to show up?

Ah.

Too bad, because I wanted to show her my new haircut.

That is quite boring.

"Oh well....."

She had gone to the hospital, so that was that.

Today happened to be the day of her monthly exam.

If I were to want to follow through, I could go to the hospital (the members-only Kyoto Branch of the Kunagisa Syndicate Comprehensive Hospital) with my Vespa, but Nao-san would be there if their schedules aligned. I didn't consider myself barbaric enough to intrude on some sibling time.

And I didn't particularly need her or anything.

Showing her my hair, well, could be done any time.

Though I couldn't dispute being at a loss.

I hopped back on the Vespa that I had stopped by the sidewalk.

Hmm, yes, I was beginning to feel a bit bad, so maybe I could go help Hime-chan with her homework, as I had promised... I said one should not learn the easy way out, but no matter the perspective one takes, that amount couldn't be finished by one person. The faculty at the school probably never expected someone to be taking supplementary classes for every class.

As I was thinking.

I realized that I was being watched.

Staring at me with their back against the brick walls of the mansion. A pure white, almost funeral-like Japanese outfit. I couldn't say it was uncommon in the Kyoto summer, but they fit perfectly within the long-sleeved garment, and it gave me a very cool and refreshing feel.

He was also wearing a fox mask.

"....."

"....."

The fox-masked man remained silent and noticed that I had noticed him, nodded lightly.

I, for whatever it was worth, nodded back.

.....What is that?

Is the vintage model of a Vespa that rare a sight? Or perhaps he thinks the Vespa seems out of place in such a high-class residential area?

For some reason.

For some reason, I hesitated in moving the Vespa forward.

"....."

And as I did so, without a word.

The fox-masked man stopped leaning against the brick wall, and without a word, walked toward me. Slowly. Slowly. Without a sound on his zori, he walked.

I couldn't move.

".....Yo."

When we were two meters apart, the fox-masked man spoke.

"A pleasure to meet you."

Now that we were closer, I could tell that he was very tall. At least 190 centimeters. That made him seem a bit non-Japanese, but the traditional clothing fit his slender form very well.

".....A pleasure to meet you."

I returned the greeting.

I couldn't see his face because of the mask, but the voice, and the rather lordly feeling he gave, made me assume him older.

"Hmm. 'A pleasure to meet you,'" the fox-masked man repeated my words. "You're alone."

"Ah, um, yes. I am alone."

"'I am alone.' Hmm. So that would mean you had business with someone in this stupidly large mansion."

"Just about."

"'Just about.' And then you missed each other."

"Yes."

"Hmm."

The fox-masked man nodded.

"So it is, well, to be honest, the same happened to me."

"Huh?"

"I also 'missed each other.' What a coincidence."

"Uh huh."

It was hard to explain, but he had a very in-your-face, a very aggressive way of speaking.

"Of course in my case I'm simply *waiting in vain* and have nothing to do with this mansion-- this building, it stands out like the Kyoto tower. Rare for Kyoto... but I like it, this sort of destructive architecture. The utter lack of care for everything, the jagged foreign shape. I want to meet the politicians and architects that modeled Shirosaki... but anyways, I was thinking this would be a pretty good touring point and landmark, and it looks like the person I was waiting for will never get here because they got lost. People who get lost in Kyoto and Sapporo are helpless idiots, in my opinion anyways."

"Ah. But this part is no longer like a Go board."

"'No longer like a Go board.' Hmm."

The fox-masked man seemed to laugh at that. Although I couldn't tell for sure, given that his face was covered by the mask. It's pretty difficult talking to someone you don't know when you cannot see their expression.

"By the way, Onii-san. How about we go somewhere and have a chat, as fellow left-behind blockheads?"

"Eh....."

"Since we're both left behind, you don't have any plans now. I find myself with some time now as well, so it's a proposition to kill each other's time. I can even treat you something nice, if you'd like."

"Ah... um, well, no thanks."

I found myself a little speechless. I was a bit stunned by his strangely decisive word choice.

"My mother told me not to follow people I don't know."

"Hmm. You're running."

"....."

Why.

Why do I have to be told that?

Though I am running!

"Yes, I'm running," I accepted it. "After all, if I step back for a moment, you look way too suspicious. What is that mask?"

"A fox."

"....."

I was given an explanation.

"A fox is a mammalia carnivora canidae vulpes vulpes."

"I know."

"You knew."

"Ah, no. I didn't know."

I didn't know foxes were dogs.

Surprising.

"Hmm. Oh well. I called out to you because I felt some sort of connection with you, but given your reaction, it's probably nothing significant enough."

"Connection?"

Connection.

Destiny. Karma.

Fate.

Words that I feel like I'm hearing a lot more lately.

"Um, you....."

"Ah! It's Onii-san!"

The question I was beginning to ask was cut in half by the energetic voice that suddenly sprung from behind.

I turned around and there was.

Niounomiya Rizumu-chan.

"Wow! What an encounter, surprising! What a coincidence, to be meeting again in a place like this!"

".....Yo."

She was still wearing that manteau.

The girly smile went well with the glasses.

Both arms were in the manteau.

Pitter-patter, she ran toward me like a little animal with hair flailing wildly behind, and it almost made me have a sense of fondness for her.

"....."

However, there is surely not one human being that would complain about how this gives me a sense of wariness instead. I stepped off the Vespa that had been left off. It's difficult to make necessary reactions while seated on a Vespa without its engine running.

Necessary reactions.

"It's been a while, Onii-san!"

Boom! she started to tackle.

I dodged.

"Hikyaunnn!"

Rizumu-chan slid along the asphalt while making an extremely bizarre, grinding sound. It seemed she couldn't brace herself with the lack of arms.

"A-are you ok!? Hang on, Rizumu-chan!"

"Thanks for play-acting worry with such a loud voice!"

She wasn't damaged in the slightest.

And then she stood up using only her leg strength.

"I'm good!"

"That's splendid."

"You're late by three hours, Rizumu."

The fox-masked man said in utterance. Rizumu-chan jumped with a gasp, and turned back to him.

"I thought you wouldn't be coming."

"M-my oh my! Mr. Fox! You were here before me! As expected of you!"

"Three hours ago."

"As expected of Mr. Fox!"

"Don't be admiring."

"Thank you for your efforts!"

"Don't be thanking me for hard work," the fox-masked man chopped Rizumu-chan's head. "And if you're going to say that, it's I appreciate it. Be careful with your words."

"Yes! Mr. Fox, I love you!"

"You're fooling no one."

The fox-masked man chopped Rizumu-chan again.

And then he turned to me.

".....This is who I was waiting for."

"....."

"Who I was waiting for, but it seems, from that reaction, Onii-san. You seem to know this."

"Yes, though while I know....."

While I know.

While I know, I would like very much not to know.

"Half a month ago, he took care of me when I collapsed!" Rizumu-chan introduced me without hesitation while I wavered. "And then he even lent me money! My appreciation would be thank you!"

"Huh. Well isn't that something....." the fox-masked man took stock of me from head to foot. "Eccentric."

".....Eccentric."

"That sort of careless politeness will lead to no good. If you do that, this fool will forever think someone's going to help her. Or are you going to say that you're always going to be around to help?"

"Eh. Uh, um....."

"Giving feed once but then not giving feed the second time is insincerity. It's ego, the pride and joy of humanity. It's also not good to give despairing people hope. People who've been given hope and start a revolution usually

end at the guillotine. The ones that live in the end are the agitators that gave hope... however," the fox-masked man said. "I'll return the money she borrowed. You did this idiot a favor, I give you my thanks."

"....."

I would appreciate being given thanks first.

I was starting to repent.

"How much?"

"Ummm....."

But you know. That was originally pick-pocketed by Kasugai-san. But it is far too late to say that now.

How troublesome.

"Three hundred. Right, Onii-san?"

"Mmm... I think it was less....."

"Three hundred. Here."

The fox-masked man took out his wallet, and then gave me four Fukuzawa Yukichi.

.....Four?

"Interest."

"Ah... thanks."

The guilt.....

The guilt keeps growing.....

"Onii-san is a good guy!"

"Guh....."

"I wish everyone in the world were like Onii-san! Then things would be wonderful!"

"Guh....."

"I love people like Onii-san! I wish I could take you home for myself!"

"Guah... uguh....."

That smile.

It's a 'this world is wonderful!' type of smile.

The holy energy started corrupting me.

Is it on purpose? Is she doing this on purpose?

Is she trying to kill me with guilt?

Then that would truly be an unsolvable murder.

This girl... is she going after a perfect crime!?

I tolerated the pain in my heart and shifted the topic.

".....Um, if I may, how are you two related?"

"Love-... mgh!"

The fox-masked man's long arm reached out and covered Rizumu-chan's mouth so tightly that there wasn't even a millimeter of open space. Rizumu-chan, without arms, had no recourse.

"You know it's my profession."

"Umm...detective."

"Mgh... mgh... great detective....."

Rizumu-chan tried, anyways.

But she was being held at bay with one arm.

"Mgh great detective, it seems," the fox-masked man said without emotion. "And, if I'm to go with that, then you could say that I'm its assistant."

"Assistant?"

An assistant to a great detective.

That would be Watson. Or perhaps Hastings. Or perhaps, umm, Kobayashi-shounen. Not that I know much. However, is this person not too strong a character to be an assistant?

"If that's not good enough, then you could call me a patron... or perhaps a client. Hmm. Though words are pointless anyways. Even if I explain it with words, it'd just be futile."

".....Futile."

"It's nonsense."

A grin.

It felt like the fox mask laughed.

I was speechless. There was no reason to be speechless but I was speechless. It felt like, it felt like I was being forced into silence for a terribly unreasonable reason.

If I were to try again.

I got goosebumps.

I got such goosebumps that I almost did not get goosebumps.

The fox-masked man continued, "If you know each other, then I must really insist," he said while nodding satisfyingly at my speechlessness.

"Come along. It looks like you and I really did have some connection. Trying to go against this level of destiny is reckless. **Destiny is to be parried**, this is basic. Carving out your own destiny is arrogance to the cubic square. We're not being swept along by destiny, **we're allowing ourselves to be swept along by destiny**. Hmm. This is why I can't stop living... Rizumu, stop standing around like that. Invite this person, properly."

"Ah, okay!" Rizumu-chan was finally freed, and turned to me and straightened up. "Well then, Onii-san, come this way!"

"There are only bricks that way," the fox-masked man's unrelenting chop struck her skull again. "I parked my car over there... let's go. You, just leave your Vespa parked there. They won't enforce parking laws in a place like this....."

"Uh, yes... um....."

I took off my helmet and hung it from the handle of the Vespa. Ah, I guess I ended up being swept along like this again, even though I know this indecisive personality causes problems.

I feel like this happened before.....

".....Ah, ahhhh!"

Suddenly, Rizumu-chan shrieked.

"O-Onii-san, your hair fell out!"

"No it didn't!"

What is this girl saying.

Those words are taboo to an adult boy.

"I cut it as a change of pace."

"Huh. I see."

"Looks good doesn't it?"

"....."

She paled.

.....Whatever.

"Stop dawdling. Hurry up."

The fox-masked man said as he walked ahead. I hadn't actually given him an answer, but this person seems quite forceful.

Destiny is for you to create.

This, Assistant Professor Kigamine had said.

Yet in most cases, destiny is a constantly churning gear that keeps spinning like a wheel regardless of your actions.

Allowing ourselves to be swept along.

This was also rather exquisite.

Around the corner was a parked a white Porsche. It had been a while since I had seen this Porsche model in person... Wait, this car is a two-seater. I could stuff myself in the back, but that is.....

"You, just put Rizumu on your lap."

"....."

What is this person demanding from someone he had just met?

"I don't want to let other people touch the steering wheel... so if you don't want to, hey Rizumu, you can walk....."

"No no no, I don't mind, really."

I hurriedly said, and then I stepped into the Porsche. What's with this person... if Rizumu-chan is strange, then this person seems rather delusional? But then again that's not how he seems... for the most part he seems very logical, but it's difficult to get a feel for what he thinks. Though I will say that a Porsche and a fox mask is quite the fashion statement.

"Eheheh, a human chair!"

Rizumu-chan said as she sat her butt on my thighs.

.....Don't call other people a human chair.

A human chair.

Not an ounce of sexiness.

"I love you!"

"....."

Rizumu-chan smiled.

.....She means no ill-will.

I shut the door.

".....So, where to, kidnapper?"

"Leaving Shirosaki out east, and then after a bit of a drive, there's a good store. Mountain soba, and the ingredients are all natural produce. It's a store that gives us tangible proof that no matter how much people tinker and try, we can't beat nature."

"Huh. Sounds nice."

"I made a reservation for two, but one more shouldn't be a problem."

"Perhaps. But it's natural produce, right? Then maybe they only have enough for two."

"Then you and Rizumu will split."

"Huh?"

"I'm not splitting."

He proclaimed boldly.

I thought he was treating me.....

Not that it matters, or rather as someone sitting in the passenger seat it does matter because it affects my life, but is he able to see in front of him and the streetlights and other cars with that mask?

"Hahah. Mr. Fox has quite the appetite! Being gluttonous. Wonderful! Mr. Fox, I love you!"

"You're being over-familiar, Rizumu. How many times do I need to tell you to watch your words."

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry," Rizumu-chan looked sad for just a moment. And then the next moment, she turned to me and smiled. "I got yelled at!"

".....It seems so."

"Yelled at once and smarter once!"

Rizumu-chan wriggled around on my lap. I dared not say it aloud because it was about a girl, but she was pretty heavy. Probably because of the manteau. Probably about 40 kilograms total.....? I looked down a bit and at Rizumu-chan's hair whorl. Her silky black hair looked all the more pretty this close.

And it reminded me.

Of that day, that night.

The moment the great detective transformed into a professional killer.

"Ah, come to think of it, Onii-san, I heard you met my brother Izumu, is that true?"

".....Yeah."

I nodded.

As for why, because that was the truth. If I'm asked whether the truth is the truth, then I must nod. Anyone would do the same. I would do the same. When I'm feeling good, anyways. Sometimes.

I met Niounomiya Izumu. That was an undeniable truth. However, this was also not the second time I met Rizumu-chan, but rather the third.

"What's wrong, Onii-san? You went all quiet. Ah, did Izumu do something mean to you?"

"Something like that. Your brother, if I may say so, has quite the personality. Has he always been like that?"

"Yup. Since a long time ago."

"You two are... similar."

"Ehh? Not at all."

"Rizumu-chan, you know....."

"If you treasure your tongue, I recommend shutting up."

The fox-masked man butt in.

"We're speeding up."

2

After a long enough drive that I thought we would be leaving Kyoto, I was brought to what you would call a traditional Japanese restaurant. An old-fashioned exterior that seemed exactly what you would expect in Kyoto. And it also matched the fox-masked man's traditional attire, though not so much myself in casual clothing and Rizumu-chan in her manteau.

The room we were led to was almost three times as large as my apartment room and the scrolls and flowers were so splendid that I was sure Miiko-san would go crazy if she were to see them. Though I had never seen Miiko-san go crazy.

Kyoto Kaiseki was brought to us.

Rizumu-chan and I had oolong tea, being underaged, while the fox-masked man had Japanese sake in a rock glass, and we toasted. No one said anything about a toast, but we nevertheless clinked our glasses.

I dampened my lips just a bit on the oolong tea.

"Ugii ugii ugii."

As for who was making the sound of an American bullfrog, it was Rizumu-chan of course. Unable to use her arms, she had clenched the tea glass with her teeth and raised a toast anyways. She almost certainly had enough jaw strength to bite through a mouth gag.

I thought that to myself, as I caressed the cut on my cheek.

Anyways.

I hadn't merely allowed myself to be carried along by this obviously suspicious looking fox-masked man and the great detective side of this two-personality girl wearing a manteau and glasses. I had reason enough, and as for that reason, there were actually two.

First, and this was personally more important, the fox-masked man. How this man intends to eat while wearing the fox mask. Or perhaps, how he intends to drink liquid. It wasn't the type of mask with an open mouth area,

so it would surely be impossible to eat and drink while wearing the mask. I was curious.

.....And.

".....What? Stop sitting there and eat."

He immediately took off his mask and reached out to the meals with his chopsticks. And then he brought the sake to his mouth with a refined motion. He certainly looked the part of an experienced man.

"....."

Well, it was obvious.

It was obvious.

But, no one would suffer if everyone could do the obvious when it was obvious.

"You've been looking like you want to say something, with that puzzled face."

".....You took off your mask."

"Mm. Yeah," the fox-masked man glanced at the mask placed to the side. "I don't know how else to eat."

"....."

Then why were you wearing a mask! I had to restrain myself from asking. That was something that should not be asked, just like Rizumu-chan's manteau. I wanted to avoid delving further.

Incidentally.

The fox-masked man had quite the manliness to him, like aged masculinity. His angry expression was a little... no, I should say it bothered me some, but anyways it helped give him a handsome look. The kimono worked to give him a sort of kabuki actor impression. I didn't think he had a need to hide a face like that behind a mask, but perhaps that was part of the fox-masked man's personal fashion statement.

Either way, it can't be helped.

Let's say one of my reasons has been solved.

Then, the second reason.

"Uhh, um, Rizumu-chan--"

"Shut up," the fox-masked man checked me with an eerily quiet, yet powerful voice. "Don't talk while eating."

"....."

Ehhhh.....

Doesn't that make eating together... pointless?

I looked at Rizumu-chan. She was eating like a dog again, but she was quietly stretching her tongue out to the meals. Quietly, munching.

"....."

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Don't let us meddle with our betters.

Follow blindly. Opportunism.

Not that it all mattered.

I acquiesced, and quietly reached out to the meal with my chopsticks.

The taste was rather thin, and it wasn't particularly good.

".....I'm just a pleb, after all."

"Mm? Did you say something, Onii-san?"

"Nah, thank you for the meal."

"Hmm."

Having finished his meal, the fox-masked man put his mask back on. As the post-meal tea was brought to us, he finally turned to me and offered, "Now, let's talk. You were about to say something." He remembered.

"Ah, umm... Rizumu-chan. That *mental labor* you mentioned before... were you hired by this person?"

"*Mental labor*?"

"....."

She forgot.

It seemed it wasn't a finishing line or anything, but rather something she came up with on the spot.

"You know, that you were looking for Zerozaki something."

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

The fox-masked man said.

".....You know of Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"Eh? No no, I don't," I hurriedly and flatly denied. "There's no way I would know. Why would I know of someone like that? What proof do you have that I know of an abject human failure like Zerozaki Hitoshiki? That's quite insulting. Really, truly terrible."

"....."

"....."

Huh.

It looks like they're being suspicious!?

"N-no, really, I just thought it was a bit of a strange name. Zerozaki, you know, Zerozaki. And then Hitoshiki. It seems so stupid. Laughable really, it's not every day you run into a masterpiece of a name like that."

".....Hmm."

I couldn't tell what expression the fox-masked man was making, because of his mask, but it didn't seem too difficult to discern the suspicious gaze from behind.

"Well, I'm the one that hired her," the fox-masked man finally said. He said, and at the same time, he chopped Rizumu-chan's head. "And you shouldn't be blabbering to everyone."

"Oh please, Mr. Fox. I wasn't blabbering. I whispered. Whispered."

"Shut up."

She got chopped again.

Rizumu-chan didn't have any means of shielding herself. And furthermore, her head happened to be at just the right level for it to be very easy for the tall fox-masked man.

".....Well, no problem. There's nothing wrong with you having heard about it... not like there's anything to hide. Rizumu. How did the investigation go? I came all the way to Kyoto and even prepared this location today to hear your answer."

"Ah. Umm, yes," Rizumu-chan seemed to straighten up a bit. "In conclusion, the person named Zerozaki Hitoshiki is no longer in Kyoto."

"....."

"Or rather, it seems he was killed."

".....I see."

The fox-masked man seemed to hesitate before nodding.

"That is a shame."

"As expected, or should I say, as Mr. Fox had said, the serial murders that happened here in Kyoto in May... the suspect behind those murders was without a doubt this Zerozaki person. I was able to find proof. And it seemed he was killed right after."

"....."

"I'll present you with a detailed report later, but most likely, I wasn't able to procure the result that Mr. Fox sought. My condolences."

"..... I see."

Wow.

The police had not issued an official statement of any sort when it came to the May serial murders. I thought it was belated for Rizumu-chan to be investigating Kyoto now, but it seemed it was simply that she began investigations late (she probably began around the end of last month), and it seemed her label as a great detective wasn't a case of pumping up inferior goods with a better name.

Pumping up inferior goods with a better name.

No, perhaps even that was being too harsh.

And, the fox-masked man was looking at me.

".....What is it?"

"No. Nothing."

"Uh huh... and that Zerozaki person, was he a friend?"

"'Was he a friend.' Hmm, I don't know him at all... at all. Never even met him. But, from what I'd heard, he seemed like someone with quite the amusing *destiny*, so I wanted to get in touch with him, but if he's dead, there's

nothing to be done. There's no way to deal with someone whose destiny has shut its doors. It seems Zerozaki Hitoshiki's and my destiny were not meant to be intertwined."

"..... I see."

"A shame."

The fox-masked man looked obviously disappointed at Rizumu-chan's report. He was so glum that you could tell even through his mask.

".....Onii-san. Do you know of the Zerozaki Family?"

".....I don't."

I answered carefully.

The fox-masked man looked at me. "Hmm."

"The Zerozaki Family. They're a group of serial killers that can't even become *evil*. An ugly army of which it is taboo to make an enemy of. The worst gathering of which it is taboo to make an ally of. A treasury of wicked blasphemy. They're merely third in name, but they're by far the most reviled among the *Killing Names*."

"....."

The fox-masked man's words sounded like a foreign language to me. It felt like the information only flowed into my head in bits and pieces. And he didn't seem to actually be explaining to me, anyways.

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki was a natural-born child to them. Natural-born, and I mean natural-born to the point of having a birth certificate. He was **a child born from an incestuous relationship within the Zerozaki**. The one inexplicable and impossible exception among a group that doesn't think about keeping things together for the future. An exception, truly an exceptional outlier. You could call him the most serial murderer of serial murderers, the most Zerozaki of the Zerozaki... I really wanted to meet him while he was alive."

"....."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

I reminisced.

The many, pointless conversations we had.

He laughed a lot.

He talked a lot.

And within him.....

I saw a bit of myself.

Though I had to restrain vomiting.

"Hmm."

The fox-masked man said, as if to provide a conclusion.

"In any case, this topic ends here... now, Onii-san. My work here is done and I'm left with free time. So, let's talk."

"Uh huh....."

So he said.

But I also felt like I fulfilled my goals. At the very least, the two reasons for me coming here had been resolved.....

If there's anything else that I would want to ask.

It would be whether the fox-masked man knows about Rizumu-chan's *brother*, Niounomiya Izumu, and that would be about it. However, that topic is rather difficult to ask.....

Especially in front of him.

Well, I'm not exactly in front of him.....

What a pain.

"Ah, then!" Rizumu-chan energetically raised her hand. "Me me me me! I have a question that I would very much like to ask Onii-san!"

".....What is it?"

"I wanted to ask you since the last time we met!"

"So, what is it?"

"What's your relationship with that kind-looking Onee-san?"

"....."

A childish interest.

Then again, I just asked the same.

"Master and maid."

"Hawah!"

Rizumu-chan arched backwards in surprise.

"M-maid! Onii-san was a maid!?"

"Not me."

"Th-then that Onee-san!? That pretty and beautiful Onee-san was a maid!?"

"Yes yes. She was. She takes care of everything around me. Kasugai-san calls me master."

"I think it was Ikki?"

"Not in front of other people, anyways."

"I see. Hmm hmm."

She accepted it.

This girl was fun to trick.

"'Kind-looking Onee-san,'" the fox-masked man said. "So what. You were in the care of someone other than this Onii-san, too?"

"Yes."

".....You shouldn't be bothering people so much. It starts getting troublesome. This Onii-san is alright, but stop creating connections with pointless people."

"Yes sir."

"However... once you create a connection, I guess you can't call it pointless regardless of what destiny it is. Because this Onii-san and that *Onee-san*'s connection **had already been formulated**, you formed that connection with the both of them. In most cases, there's nothing you can do about that."

".....Connection?"

"Yeah, connection."

The fox-masked man seemingly chopped Rizumu-chan's head for no reason, and then turned to me.

"Do you believe in fated meetings?"

".....Huh?"

Those.

Those words.

I feel like I heard them from someone, at some point, at some place.

"For example... right here right now, three people are gathered. Some people might call this a meaningless coincidence, but there's a perspective that **that's not true**."

".....Connection."

"You *helped* Rizumu two weeks ago, and then two weeks later the *fortune* to by *coincidence* meet myself, the client of that Rizumu... that's no longer fortune or coincidence."

".....Are you saying that it's destiny?"

"There's nothing in this world that's meaningless. Everything has some significant meaning to the world. For as long as you're a piece of this worldly construct, you can't escape from the curse of fate. Didn't I tell you earlier? We're allowing ourselves to be swept along by fate. If there's anyone that thinks they have no value, that they're living without any relation with the world, they're past the point of ignorance and into the realm of arrogance."

".....Are you a fatalist?"

"More of a story-ist, I would say. I don't think there's some idiot like a god, but there's definitely a Story to this world. That's why the characters appearing in that Story, the cast of that Story have no freedom. They have freedom, but that's why they don't have freedom. Just just just, following the Story."

"Following....."

"The three of us met there because we were meant to meet there. That'd be the cliche way to say it."

"....."

For example, if Kunagisa's monthly examination wasn't today.

For example, if Rizumu-chan hadn't gotten lost en route to Shirosaki.

For example, if the fox-masked man had chosen another place to meet.

No, it wasn't necessary for there to be such a big change.

There just needed to be a slight shift.

If I had not spoken to Miiko-san at the parking lot, if I had fulfilled my promise to Hime-chan, or any other such whimsical thing. That was all it would have taken for me to not have met this fox-masked man and to reunite with Rizumu-chan.

The result of such intricate coincidence.

Was it right to say that we met because we were meant to meet?

"Of course, there's some level of limited freedom... like this."

The fox-masked man toppled over a tea cup.

The spilled inside spread over the table.

Slowly, gradually.

".....This unreasonable, pointless, unnatural action can be done. But we can't resist the bigger picture, the Story. We have small freedoms, but not large freedoms. The gigantic freedom is destroyed by smaller freedoms. Like a caged bird. Whatever you do, it gets corrected."

"Corrected....."

A caged bird.

Even if the cast of characters go and act on their own.

The Story itself cannot be changed.

"Yes, corrected. Well, it's too late now so this is juststupid 'what if' theorizing, but if we were to miss each other today, at that place. In that case, you would of course not meet myself nor Rizumu... **or so you would think, but that's not how it works**."

"Megante....." Rizumu-chan dropped her forehead on the table. "Mr. Fox, I don't know what you're saying. By the way, if you split it in half, Megante sounds like a girl's name."

"As for what happens then."

It was an oppressive and impressive display of ignoring.

"**You and Rizumu and I would meet at a different place, and we would have a similar conversation**. The timeline would shift a bit, but **somewhere sometime**, at a different location and a different hour, we would still partake

in this action. I call this phenomenon Back Nozzle. Incidentally, there's no guarantee that Rizumu and I would be together in such a case. You might even meet us one by one."

"....."

"Alternatively, as another possibility, instead of meeting Rizumu and me here, **there was a chance that you would have met another person. Someone with whom you would have had a conversation that provided the same meaning and result**. This wouldn't need to be another human being of my level, or lower or higher, nor would it need to be someone who necessarily must appear again in the story, as long as it's someone who gives you the same meaning as myself. Well, given this level of destiny, probably anyone would do as a substitute. Even when it comes to Rizumu....."

He glances at Rizumu-chan.

".....Even if it were this one's big brother Izumu, your fate probably wouldn't have changed much."

"Izumu....." I couldn't help myself from interjecting. "....-kun, you say."

"Ah... ah, come to think of it, you did mention in the car that you also met Izumu. Then that's all the more true. If you didn't run into Rizumu here and now, you probably would have met Izumu *somewhere* and *sometime*. That's how it goes. I call this phenomenon Jail Alternative."

Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative.

Even if you procrastinate on something that must be done now, you still end up having to do it at some point, and if it still must be done now, then someone will end up doing it in your stead.

The system of the world.

That... is almost like.

That is almost like the world has a will of its own. Not at the level that most people think about when referring to gods and *the creator of the world* but... **as if the story itself has a means of ensuring that everything returns to the way it should be**.....

Then how about those that struggle against fate.

Are they erased by fate itself?

Just to tie loose ends.

Natural selection.

Natural selection, with the invisible hand of god.

That phrase fits, if you only take the meaning of the words themselves.

Fitting, fate-wise.

Fitting, destiny-wise.

"This isn't that strange a story, nor that revolutionary a story. 'Molecules formulate into predetermined shapes of atoms.' 'Same atoms all have the same shape.' 'Atoms cannot combine in more ways than have been set.' 'Connections are secured under pre-established rules.'...and then 'the power to return to the way things were is something all things fundamentally have.'"

"All things... then, fate too."

"'All things... then, fate, too.' I guess you could call it fate's automatic recovery system. Or an error correction system. **No matter what you do, it'll be fixed somewhere else in the end**. The balance sheet is closed. Loose ends are tied. It means that the world isn't seeking some absolute revolution. No matter how different the yin, all the way at the end, you will still arrive at the same yang. A preestablished harmony... ah, that's right, I guess the easy way to put it would be that thing. Space Will."

".....?"

"What, you haven't read Ghost Sweeper Mikami? What were you doing up to that age without reading manga?" the fox-masked man said with a bored tone. "I can only call it inferior, but how about the Dragonball?"

".....Do you like manga?"

"I love it."

The fox-masked man declared, bluntly.

"If you're not familiar with these words, how about the Akashic records? There's a bit of a disjoint if you think of it that way, but it should help you

understand. In other words, fundamentally, it's the work of fools to fight against fate. And to carve your own path? Impossible."

".....That sort... I've never heard such a decisive opinion on the matter before, but I must say, it doesn't seem like a bad opinion."

I didn't have to fudge any thoughts to give that opinion, and from my past experience, there were plenty of parts with which I could agree. I definitely couldn't agree with the notion that there's nothing meaningless in the world, but even that wasn't something I couldn't understand.

Fate is *decided*.

Decided means there's no room for change.

That's not a religious concept, but rather one that was mathematical, statistical, and probabilistic. At the end of the day, human beings only have a select few choices at any given moment.

If that's the case.

If that's the case, it's ridiculous.

If that's the case, it's a masterpiece.

In other words, this me.

Would have ended up being me no matter what happened.

.....That's.

That's nonsense.

"Who the Earth revolves around? That's been set in stone forever. The Earth revolves around the Earth. Those that think the world exists for them and those that think they're useless to the world both are making the same fundamental mistake. Both helpless fools."

".....If I were to pick, I consider myself someone that provides no value to the world," though that would be the case regardless of the choices. "Then of course you would be the exact opposite, in accepting yourself as a member in the cast of characters, a piece of the world bound by the prison of fate?"

"I don't know about that. I'm a guy that wants to stand outside of that Story. A Story this amusing is much more fun observing from the outside than being a participant."

".....Can you even do that? If your theories are correct, then it would be rather difficult to step out of this story, out of this world."

"Difficult, but not impossible. No, you could say I'm already standing outside--

I've already been exiled from karma.

---the best I can do to participate is to meet with people like Onii-san. I'm half-assed and vague."

"Zzzz, zzzzz, snort."

Rizumu-chan had fallen asleep.

It seems our conversation was boring.

To be honest, this must be one of the most boring conversations to be listening in on. It had gone so far into the conceptual, that even for myself, participating in the conversation, the words of the fox-masked man seemed as hazy and illusory as a dream. You could say I didn't actually understand what he was saying.

However, then why.

Then why does what this person says strike so deep?

Why does it resonate?

Why does this nonsense resonate?

It seemed, right now.

Almost like I was being told an outrageous confession.

Then, no.

I don't want any part of such importance.

I don't want anything to do with the core of the Story.

"Well, that's why I have that great detective or something over there working in my stead and working and such... look at me well, Onii-san. Take a good look at how I am. This is the result of a man who fought against fate. Aren't I pathetic and downtrodden? Though I admit I like this pathetic-ness and downtrodden-ness myself... losing isn't so bad."

".....Did you fight against the story in the past? Is that what you mean by being exiled from karma?"

"Pretty much. Because of a slight mishap, I was about to utterly destroy the law of cause and effect, that law that shouldn't really be possible to destroy. The punishment for killing a god has always been exile from paradise. Hmm. In retrospect, that wasn't very thought-out and I'm still dragging it with me, but I don't consider that the folly of youth, because if I didn't do it then, I'd be doing it now. Back Nozzle and all."

"Utterly destroy the law of cause and effect....."

But that would be.

An apple will *fall*, *rain* will *fall*, *the sun* is *bright*, *the night* is *dark*, *you laugh* when you're *having fun*, *you cry* when you're *sad*... you *die* if you're *living*.

A rebellion against causality.

A revolution against the existent destiny.

A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come

Researching not dying.

"Then I suppose Assistant Professor Kigamine's research is also something along those lines....."

"'.....Assistant Professor Kigamine's research is also,'" the fox-masked man caught and repeated my words. "..... Is that what you said, Onii-san?"

"Huh? Umm, yes. I did."

"Kigamine... Kigamine Yaku."

"Yes. Ah, you know of her?"

She must really be famous, then.

Aikawa-san seemed to know of her, too.

".....W**hat a nostalgic name**. **Come to think of it**, **that was part of the cast of characters back then too**."

".....?"

"Onii-san. That Kigamine... umm... Assistant Professor. Hmm. Tell me about *Assistant Professor Kigamine's research*."

"Umm."

Even though he's asking.

Am I actually allowed to tell him?

"The Human Biology Department of Takatsu University and, umm, something about researching not dying....."

"'Researching not dying.'"

He repeated like an incantation.

Suddenly, the fox-masked man stood up.

Given his height, when he looked down at me as I sat on the cushion, it felt like I was being looked down upon from heaven.

My body suddenly felt cold.

My heartbeat raced.

"Eh, uh. Yes....."

".....Kigamine is doing something like that... no, maybe... perhaps, *that* was left behind... didn't calculate... no, I just forgot."

The fox-masked man began muttering to himself, barely out of my hearing. He looked completely different from before. He was quite eccentric already, but now it was like, you would say... not so much an eccentric but rather.

A madman.

"Amusing."

The fox-masked man said with a tone that reeked of abject boredom.

Furthermore, he looked both displeased and disturbed.

"You and me's *connection*, it seems to be a very amusing one indeed. How fascinating. I thought *Zerozaki Hitoshiki* was my main goal, but maybe you were the right answer."

".....Huh?"

"Hmm. This average looking ordinary boy that I *just so happened* to encounter in a *no particular place*... that too is quite amusing. Well, it's cruel

for both you and me to desire that much. There's no way, would be the way to put it. I don't think that's possible, but it's correct."

"Uh, umm... Mr. Fox?"

"Wake up, Rizumu."

The fox-masked man kicked Rizumu-chan's ribs with his toes. "Hyan!" Rizumu-chan yelped while waking up.

"Wh- what? Ah, you finished talking!"

"We're going home."

"Eh? B-but, it's still early! I still want to talk to Onii-san! We finally met again!"

"I have business for you and your brother and we're on the clock. We're too short on time. Even if it's a case of Back Nozzle, this should be done as soon as possible. Hurry up."

".....Mmm."

Rizumu-chan looked to be in disagreement, but she didn't argue further. Probably, or rather almost certainly, *brother* was a keyword for the two.

"Put on my manteau please."

"Right."

The sight of the rather haughty fox-masked man helping Rizumu-chan with her manteau was somewhat funny.

"Done."

"Yes. Well then."

Rizumu-chan, now wearing her manteau again, turned to me while sitting, and then saluted.

"Well well well! Onii-san, until another time!"

".....Yes."

I answered.

"Give Izumu-kun my greetings, too."

"Kay! Farewell!"

Rizumu-chan's smile was blinding.

But her incisors were peeking out from her mouth.

The sharp incisors.

"....."

"Hey, Onii-san."

"Eh, uh, yes."

"Feel free to take your time. I'll finish paying the bill. I'm sorry after inviting you, but as you can see, I can't send you back anymore."

The fox-masked man placed two 10,000 yen bills on the table.

"To pay for a taxi."

Ah, that's right.

I need to go back to Shirosaki to pick up my Vespa.

".....Thank you for everything."

"'For everything.' Don't worry about it. Well then--"

"--*if we have* a connection, let us meet again."

Rizumu-chan and the fox-masked man left the room.

I remained alone after the shoji was shut.

Three tea cups remained on the table. One was toppled over, with its content spilled out over about half of the table.

But that had nothing to do with the Story.

And fate didn't bother stopping it.

Everything happens as it does.

And only as it must.

Without recourse.

Everything, that way.

".....Ah."

And that was when I finally came to the realization.

I got it, I got it.

The reason why I had come here.

It wasn't the trivial questions like how he would eat while wearing a mask or because I wanted to ask about Zerozaki. It was a more simple, easy matter.

That unreasonable personality.
That forceful way of talking.
That lack of inhibition for hitting people.
That lack of care for other people’s situations.
And that manly face beneath the mask.
And more than anything else, that triumphant, confident look.
"That person was very similar to Aikawa-san....."

3

Midnight.

I headed straight to Hime-chan's room on the first floor after returning to the tatami apartment. Hime-chan sat brawling with the mountain of homework piled on the small glass table that looked totally out of place in a tatami-floored room.

Why does she study?

Because there is a mountain.

".....Yo, Hime-chan."

"....."

She shot me an incredibly resentful look.

I couldn't help from taking a step back.

To be given such a look when I was feeling charitable about helping with homework and such... well, actually it's quite deserved.

".....My bad," I apologized and then I sat at the table to face her. "It's great that you were able to do this much alone. Yes, yes, you did your best, Hime-chan. Good for you and have a pat. I'll do the rest for you, so Hime-chan, go ahead and take a break."

"....."

".....What do you want?"

"....."

"What is it that you wish of me, princess?" I tried acting like an inexplicable character instead of just being polite. "Please, go ahead and scrub the floor with this user of nonsense."

".....No, I'm fine," Hime-chan heaved a non-forgiving sigh. "All is last when given to a fool if you take Master seriously."

"I'm glad you say that."

I would have been happier if she had said all is lost when given to a fool, but I also don't have such high expectations.

"In exchange, please butcher me sometime."

"What.....?"

I would be open to treating her sometime.....

She messed that up, right?

"By the way, Master, where did you go today, anyways?"

"Who knows... I was taken by car, so I don't know for sure, but some traditional restaurant."

"A traditional restaurant!" Hime-chan expressed surprise. "A traditional restaurant, as in a traditional restaurant? The ones that a lot of important people go to for scheming, Master! What scheming eviling have you been up to!?"

"Such prejudice..." Also, evil can't be used that way. "Oh, that reminds me, Hime-chan."

I decided to ask while doing her homework (for 7th graders, and because it was for supplementary lessons, the questions were even easier than you would expect). Yes, Aikawa-san is very sloppy, so it was expected for her to only know the rough details, but perhaps Hime-chan would know more.

"Hime-chan, do you know of a kid named Niounomiya Rizumu?"

".....Niounomiya?"

"Could be Izumu too. Niounomiya Izumu or Niounomiya Rizumu, either of them."

"....." Hime-chan went silent for a moment. "Niounomiya, Yamiguchi, Zerozaki, Susukino, Hakamori, Tenbuki, Ishinagi....."

"Yes?"

Did she say something?

I couldn't hear her well.

Yamiguchi? Ishinagi?

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun?

".....I know them. The Niounomiya siblings, right?"

"Ah, so they're famous," I paused my writing hand. "Aikawa-san seemed to know them too, but for some reason she wasn't very helpful. You know, because of how she is."

"No, they're not famous. It's the opposite if anything, Hime-chan just happens to know of them. The Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic, Izumu the *Man Eater* and Rizumu the *Carnival*. Of course, Hime-chan has never met them, but I've heard about the Massacre Magic of the Niounomiya Troupe from Hagihara-san."

"Hagihara... Shiogi-chan."

The *Strategist* and Sumiyuri Academy student representative, Hagihara Shiogi.

It wasn't so long ago that I could call it a nostalgic name, nor was she someone who I could easily forget, and to be honest, there was nothing about that girl that was worth being nostalgic over.

"Hagihara-san fought the *Niounomiya* once when she was a first-grader. I just heard her talk about that. Otherwise, you'd never know about what's going on in the *Niounomiya* because they don't leak any information. It's pretty rare to find an organization so good at being secretive, both in the underworld and otherwise."

"Hmm....."

"Like *Fragment*, the five-man Niounomiya group. They're a nutty killer with five bodies housing the same single soul. They're a pain, you know? You hafta try to block ten arms with just two."

One soul in five bodies.....

What's that?

For a moment, I thought of the Chiga sisters at Wet Crow's Feather Island. Chiga Akari, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko... no, I think that was just a joke by Teruko-san, or maybe it wasn't.....

".....You can manufacture that?"

"Beats me. But I don't think Hagihara-san would lie like that. The *Niounomiya* are a troupe that do whatever it takes to make methods of murder look like magic. Common sense and bias are both totally pointless with them. That's why they're given the name the Niounomiya Troupe of Massacre Magic. They're all like seasonal articles, even their branches."

"Seasonal articles....."

Sounded like something Hagihara-chan would say.

The straightforward strategist that took advantage of every available fastball and curveball.

"Yes. I didn't find this out from Hagihara-san, but I've heard there's a three-person group in the Troupe that uses a Japanese katana, a naginata, and a bow. Philosophically to come after you from close range, mid-range, and long-range, but like, that's pretty seasonal, too."

"Seasonal."

Which means places like Sumiyuri Academy, not counting *Zig Zag*, and Zerozaki Hitoshiki are in some ways pretty orthodox.

"But, being seasonal and all aside, they're definitely the most powerful group of killers. Jun-san, even that battle-loving *Humanity's Strongest Contractor*, Aikawa Jun, prefers to avoid confrontation with them."

"That much....."

"Yes. And that *Man Eater* Izumu and *Carnival* Rizumu... I'd heard of them from Hagihara-san, just like with *Fragment*."

".....Then you know of *them*. Or rather, of *her* condition."

"Yes. Double personality."

Double personality.

Also known as Dissociative Personality Disorder. There's no need to explain it, as it's commonly used in manga and novels and movies. Kunagisa Tomo would probably think of *Billy Milligan the 24 people*, and Aikawa Jun would probably think of Sensui Shinobu. Though it doesn't matter what you think of.

"I'm the sub if anything and Rizumu is the main. Gyahaha! Guess you could say I'm the body and she's the puppet!"

He, Izumu-kun had explained.

"So does Rizumu-chan know of your existence?"

"Of course she does. Though she doesn't seem to know I'm inside her. That's how they set her memories. Yeeeeees! We talk on the phone sometimes, you know? Sort of like, hello? It's me, Doppio."

"....."

Hmm.

I posed another question to Hime-chan.

"But I still don't understand. What's the benefit of having two minds in a single body? The advantages of having five bodies for one mind makes perfect sense....."

"Umm. The sister's personality, *Carnival*, has no killing powers. And I mean like, none whatsoever.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

Rizumu-chan.

"The *brother* Niounomiya Izumu, *Man Eater*, takes care of all of the massacre work."

Niounomiya Izumu.

Izumu-kun.

"That's all the more confusing. They call themselves a Massacre Magic Troupe, but one of them lacks any killing skills....."

"Umm. It's hard to explain. Master probably won't really get it," Hime-chan crossed her arms. "Even Master should understand why Hanging High School trained young girls as *berserkers*. And so, *sending* in a *little girl* with *no skills for killing* to the target. Do you get what that means?"

".....A spy?"

"More than that. Because she's unconscious about it. She unconsciously gathers information useful for *Man Eater*, and then creates a situation perfect for *Man Eater*. Consciously and subconsciously, she investigates and creates the perfect stage for herself. That's the role of *Carnival*."

"....."

"And, like, as a secondary effect, she probably acts as an emotional stabilizer. *Man Eater* Niounomiya Izumu sounds like he's bonkers, or like his personality is pretty broken."

"I see. Like a radiator."

So more Sharaku Hosuke than Sensui Shinobu.

Speaking of which, when I was ruining a seat over at the ER3 System, I dabbled in psychology a little, but I never actually met someone with Dissociative Personality Disorder. I never imagined that I would run into one like this.

".....I wonder if that was also manufactured."

"Who knows. like I said, there's no way to dig deeper. Death awaits if you go any deeper. Hagihara-san also didn't... well, maybe she didn't tell Hime-chan out of safety concerns," Hime-chan said. "By the way," she looked at me. "What about the Niounomiya siblings, Master?"

"....."

I feel like I should avoid telling her that, actually, Kasugai-san picked up the little sister last month and then I met the big brother personality and then I met the little sister personality again today.

There's no need to add to her worries.

Hime-chan is different from Aikawa-san.

"Nothing, was just wondering. By the way, how did Hagihara-chan fare when she fought the Nionoumiya Troupe? Did she win? Or did she lose?"

"Hagihara-san doesn't think of things in *wins* and *losses*. Her matches are counted differently. To her, *victory* and *defeat* are simply a step toward the next move."

".....From that perspective, Hime-chan and Aikawa-san were probably not *enemies* to Hagihara-chan."

"Yes. Hagihara-san was like someone endless playing Go against herself. That's why she was tough to approach... other than by Saijou-chan anyways. Though Hagihara-san seemed to be more annoyed by her than anything."

Hime-chan suddenly looked lonely. She tried to look down to hide it, but I caught a glimpse. Nothing could be done about catching a glimpse. I couldn't act like I saw nothing. Please stop. It hurts me to see such a look.

Ah, geez.

This girl makes me want to do something for her.

"Hime-chan, come here."

"Yes?"

"Come here like I asked, here, around the table."

"? What?"

Hime-chan did as I asked.

"Raise your arms."

"Yes."

Hime-chan did as I asked.

"Close your eyes."

"Yes."

Hime-chan did as I asked.

Really, she must learn to be suspicious of people.

And so.

"There!"

I sexually harassed her.

"Yaahh!" she screamed loudly enough to shake the entire apartment as she back stepped away from me in a manner that could only be described as agile. "Wha. Wha-wha-what are you doing! W-where are you touching!"

"Beats me, where did I touch?"

".....Ugh."

"Hey hey, that sucks, Hime-chan was touched in a place that can hardly be described? What a perverted girl."

"Ugh~, uh, ooooough... egh, ugh."

"....."

I may have gone a little too far.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. All I wanted was to break the mood because Hime-chan was suddenly going into a somber nostalgic mood. It's a misunderstanding. Please don't give me that look, I'm not a pedophile nor underage sex offender.

"Uguh... ugh, Master why are you always so mean to only Hime-chan....."

She was seriously crying.

Tears everywhere.

.....Umm.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

I gave a direct apology.

With no nonsense.

".....Waaahh."

"But, because it looked like Hime-chan was being nostalgic, it's not something you want to remember much, right? Hanging High School, about Sumiyuri Academy."

"That's right. But, it's not like there was nothing good from there. Like Hagihara-san and Saijou-chan... and."

"....."

And probably.

Sheisei Yuma as well.

"Haha, and you know," Hime-chan wiped her eyes and forced herself to smile. "It's not like school's much fun now either. All this studying."

"Students are supposed to be studying."

".....Well, it's like, Master is paying for Hime-chan's tuition, anyways."

".....That's true."

Aikawa-san was technically Hime-chan's guardian and Aikawa-san was transferring funds into my bank account for her living expenses, but I was the one paying for tuition.

After the incident in June, I had a conversation with Aikawa-san that went like this.

"Ah? Who cares about school."

"It's no good this way. How is Hime-chan going to find a job with that personality? If she has no skills, then she should at least go to university."

"Blah. Look at this guy all stained in social customs. Fine then, you're paying for the tuition."

"Of course!"

Though the last line was a lie.

And then my savings ran dry. I'm slowly recuperating some of that by working as a tutor, but I can't dispute the notion that I put my foot in my mouth.

And you know, I think I suck at using money.

"Do you hate school?"

"Huh?"

"If you don't like studying that much, you can quit. I forced you to go, anyways."

"Ah. No, that's not what I mean," Hime-chan waved her hands around in denial. "I hate studying, but it's fun being with friends and such."

"Well that's good to hear."

".....And you know," Hime-chan returned to her original seat at the table. "At the end of the day, Hime-chan enjoys living right now. Everyone in the apartment is friendly."

Hime-chan stared at me.

With such innocent eyes.

But that wasn't just innocence.

There were a lot of things, a lot of things that she had to overcome.

And that innocence was a result of it all.

"I like my lifestyle now. Life is fun. That's why I really appreciate everything, Master. Hime-chan is now really, really happy. Life is filled with happiness."

"That's good to hear."

"That's why I'll forgive you for most things," her innocent expression transformed. "But if you do that again, I'll tell Jun-san."

"So you're telling me to die....."

What a terrifying girl.

Is she really appreciative of me.....?

"Ah, that reminds me, Hime-chan," I decided to put energy into changing the subject. "After hearing about Aikawa-san, have you heard of her having a brother?"

"A brother?"

"Yes."

".....As in a family member?"

"Yup. I saw someone that felt a lot like Aikawa-san today. He was wearing an animal mask and he was actually the person I was doing some evil scheming with at the restaurant."

I excluded mentioning Rizumu-chan and explained the conversation that I had with the fox-masked man.

Hime-chan tilted her head to the side.

".....Doesn't sound similar."

"Really?"

"Jun-san would never say something like 'destiny is set.' If anything, she'd say the opposite."

"....."

Carve out your own destiny.

Or something like that.

If anything, Aikawa-san's position is indeed probably more on the side that the fox-masked man laughed at as being foolish.

"Jun-san would snort at such stupidity like the world being a story. She'd say something like 'the story is for you to write for yourself.'"

"That's true, but the nuance was a bit different. Umm, how would I explain it....."

The world has a story.

And each and every person has a meaning.

And there is no meaningless cast member.

However.....

Even if the meaning isn't fulfilled.

The balance is closed somewhere, at the end.

There is a reason for everything in the world, but that's all.

No meaning to success.

No meaning to failure.

The yin may differ, but the yang is the same.

"....Isn't that worse than just talking about destiny normally?" Hime-chan asked. ".....Because... because that doesn't mean that there's a meaning to life or that there's no meaning to life, but that **there's a meaning but regardless of whether you fulfill that meaning, the result is the same** is what he's saying."

"Well, true."

That's true.

There's no need to adhere to destiny.

There's no reason to resist destiny.

Either way,

If it's the same...

Someone will eventually take care of your failure.

Then allowing ourselves to be swept along by destiny is...

Quite a lot to ask for.

Should be a lot to ask for.

"....."

"I've never heard of Jun-san having a big brother or like, Hime-chan's never heard of Jun-san talking about any relatives."

"I see."

"Of course, Jun-san obviously would have parents and could have siblings, but you know despite how she looks, she never talks about the past."

Never talks about the past.

Never talks about her own past.

"That's similar to Master."

"Although I think the reason for that differs completely between myself and Aikawa-san, but I see. Then he's probably not a brother... relative... might also be impossible....."

Then a similar stranger.

That's how things go.

Simple, but probable.

"Mmm... but he was rather suspicious. Suspicious, or more like, asking to be suspected....."

"What's wrong? Does that masked guy bother you that much?" Hime-chan leaned toward me. "Then should Hime-chan go kill him?"

"....."

That was such a... such a nonchalant, nondescript way of posing such a question.

"My fingers are fully healed and I fixed the *weakness* Jun-san taught me, so as long as that masked guy isn't that crazy, he should be easy....."

"Hime-chan!"

I yelled.

That seemed to startle her, because her eyes widened.

"Wh-what? Why're you shouting so loud?"

".....Hime-chan. That... that's not good. That is... that's not needed. For Hime-chan to live on this side now, such words can never be said again."

"Eh... but."

"No buts."

I said.

Even though I'm in no place to say it.

I still must say it.

"You must never again say that you will kill someone. Killing someone is even worse. Otherwise you will lose everything in the life you're enjoying

now. Are you not having fun? Are you not enjoying life now? If you're enjoying it, then you must enjoy it."

"....."

"Got it?"

".....Got it," Hime-chan said with a sad look. "I'm sorry. I'll reflect on it."

".....Yes."

If you can apologize there, you're fine.

It's not too late.

Not too late, like it is for me.

Not too late, like it is for me.

It's too late for me.

.....That is also nonsense.

I self-deprecated.

What do I think I'm doing? Really, what do I think I'm doing? Do I think there's any power behind my words, as someone who didn't make it? Who am I to say something like that? There's no point in me saying something, because it's too late for me.

Even though nothing changes in the world.

Carve out my own destiny?

Laughable.

Laughable?

Make me laugh.

Is that not your job?

Because I am a clown.

Hime-chan looked downtrodden and also looked as though she was expecting more. Really... really, I'm poor at dealing with this girl. Truly poor. Why am I having to bother with someone else.

Responsibility.

Obligation.

Something like that.

Something like that?

Was I a good enough person to act for something like that, to work for something like that? When did I suddenly become such a good person?

I had no idea, really.

Or maybe I'm just acting like I became a good person.

Maybe I'm trying to have Hime-chan do what I wasn't able to do, in my place, before it's too late for her too.

My alternative.

A contracting of my crime.

Yeah, that's exactly right.

I don't want to do anything anymore.

I am, in truth, not good with Hime-chan not because she's similar to Kunagisa. In truth, because of that, I project myself onto her. In a different way from Zerozaki, Hime-chan is very similar to myself.

That is why, Hime-chan.

At least you should live properly, Hime-chan.

Is what I want.

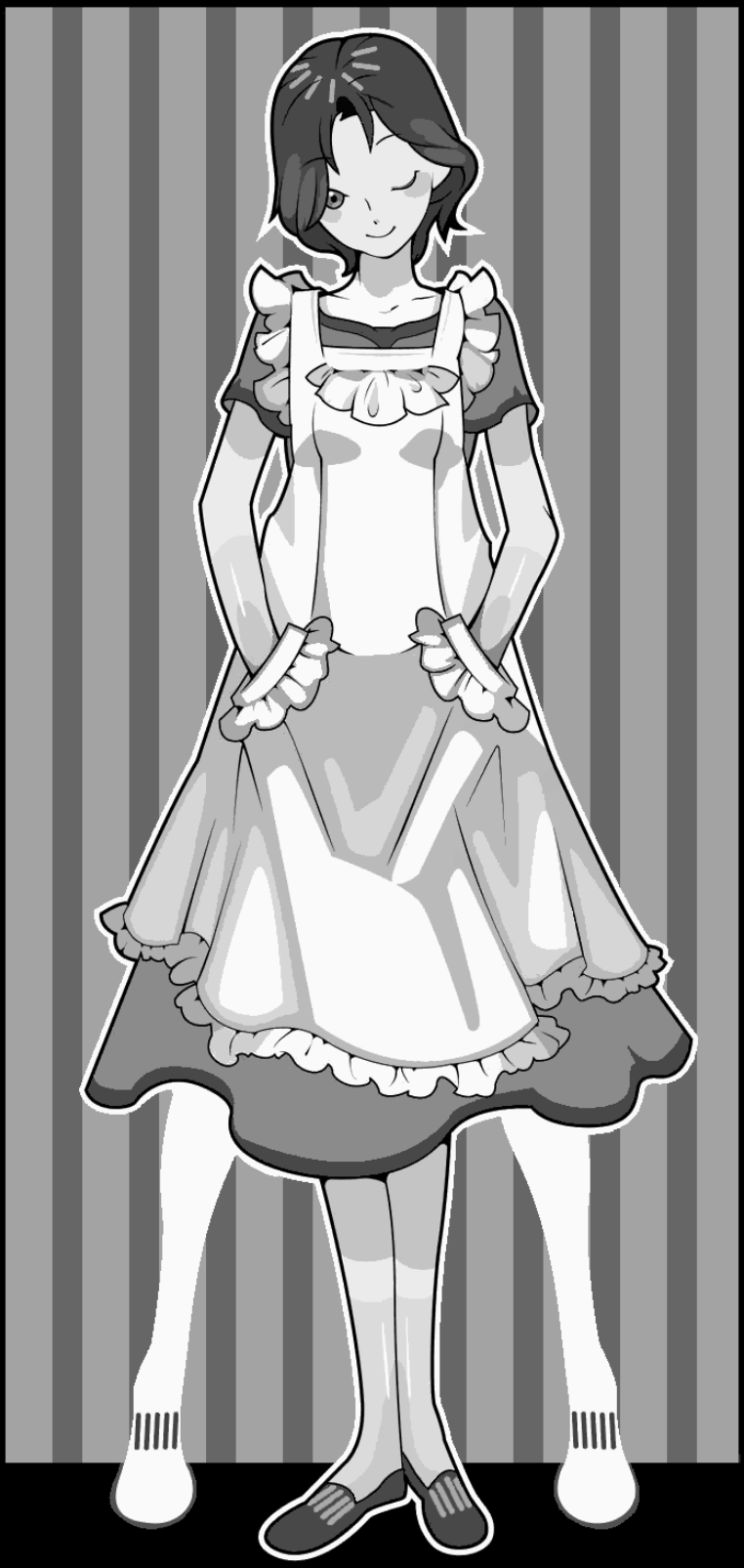
".....Hime-chan."

"Yes?"

"Be on your best behavior during the aptitude test tomorrow."

"Yes! Leave it to me!"

Hime-chan smiled and answered joyfully.



CHAPTER 4 — OBSERVATIONS (EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT)

KASUGAI KASUGA

ACADEMIC

0

I agree with your opinion.

However, I would rather die than acknowledge your right to that opinion.

1

I saw this reality.

One in which there was myself, sitting alone facing the serial killer that brought fear and confusion to Kyoto during May, though the memory of that incident has become nothing more than a flickering haze to most. Where and when, just blandly and quietly, obsessively and quietly, quickly and quietly, while taking care to keep our sounds muffled from the darkness surrounding us, we talked.

The serial killer asked me.

Have you ever killed someone?

I answered the serial killer.

Please, of course I've never killed someone. Killing someone is preposterous. I've never ever killed someone and I don't ever plan to kill someone. I've held myself in check even when I had the urge, and I will continue to hold myself in check no matter how many emotions sweep over me in the future.

The serial killer forced a laugh at my answer.

Liar.

I'm not lying. I wouldn't lie. I don't lie. Don't act as though I'm the same as you, because we're different. Human beings that kill people are mentally broken. They're abnormal.

What a ridiculous masterpiece. In this world. In this day and age. In this world and in this day and age with so much misfortune and violence and deceit and bloodshed and horror, there's no one that's killed no one.

I thought to myself that I probably actually agreed, but agreeing wouldn't allow the conversation to continue, so I played devil's advocate and scolded the serial killer.

That is a skewed opinion. What you say is so off-target that it's actually embarrassing to even listen to. This world isn't filled with only misfortune and violence and deceit and bloodshed and horror, there are other things. Plenty of other things. You could say the other things are the majority.

For example.

For example, fortune.

For example.

For example, justice.

For example.

For example, love.

For example.

For example, friendship.

For example.

For example, dreams.

What a masterpiece.

The serial killer narrowed his cat-like eyes.

Splendid, splendid. A masterpiece, no doubt about it, a masterpiece. That foolishness is so satisfactory that it hurts my stomach to listen to. Such things don't exist, such places don't exist, such times don't exist, they're all just fakes that look like mirages. They're all so phony it makes me puke. Fortune's just decorated misfortune and justice is another word for violence and love is a byproduct of deceit and friendship is just a reflection of bloodshed and dreams are the prologue to horror. Fate and destiny and karma and inevitability are all just destructive fairy tales for massacring hope. There's not a penny of value in just living in this world. There's no point in

living. They say if something can go wrong, it will, and that's just how life is, full of despair. Worms and spiders and pond skaters all die too, rotting corpses all of them. What comes of living? Murder is everything. Having to kill. If there's someone in front of you, kill them, and if they're behind you, kill them. If they're not near you, find them and kill them. Kill and be killed and eat each other.

I cannot imagine that you're saying that seriously. You'll probably say something different tomorrow. Murder is for living. Murder is meaningless. Murder is art. Murder is space itself. As if you're colored like a rainbow, you'll find another meaning in the same action. Because you're like the manifestation of whim. The same way I also am like the manifestation of whim. However, you have nothing acting as a restraint, including these words of mine, and as such, you're much too free.

And you, because of all that, are much too un-free. You're right, of course it's all a joke. As much of a joke as your existence. Good grief, you're miraculously un-free.

The serial killer joked.

But I don't think you're being serious, either. You're a big liar and you say anything but the truth. Because you don't look in the least like you're fond of humans. Not that you dislike them either. You hate them.

Not at all. There are plenty of humans I like. Movies filmed by humans, music composed by humans, art drawn by humans, cooking perfected by humans, cars and planes engineered by humans, academics studied by humans, stories penned by humans, they're all fantastic things.

You just like movies and music and art and cooking and cars and planes and academics and stories. That you like movies and music and art and cooking and cars and planes and academics and stories indicates how little you think of humans. How you just think of humans as a petty machination to create culture and arts. That perspective is broken.

Broken?

Defective.

I think that's saying too much. You act like I'm mad.

Then do you like humans?

.....

I like humans.

The serial killer said with a grin.

I solemnly asked.

Then why do you kill humans?

The serial killer solemnly answered.

Who knows? I don't care, and I don't care to know. It doesn't matter to me one bit who and how many I kill. It's all someone else's business. Murder has nothing to do with me.

Then why do you say you like humans?

The serial killer answered with the same manner of speech.

I like humans. I like humans. I love humans. I need to keep saying that. Regardless of the truth, regardless of what the truth is, I need to keep saying that. Because if I don't, I'll probably start to dislike humans.

Dislike humans.

If I don't, I'll probably hate humans. That, I'd rather avoid. If I don't put in the effort to like humans, if someone I actually like shows up, I'll probably kill them.

.....

You don't think I can change.

.....

Don't you want to change?

And with those words, I fell asleep, and returned to my dreams.

And then.

And then August 15th, on a Monday, as well as the World War II Memorial Day.

Four o'clock in the evening.

We were getting ready to leave on the Fiat 500 I was borrowing from Miiko-san after Hime-chan had returned from her battlefield (school).

"Hime-chan, you don't need to change."

"Oyo. How come?"

"Students tend to do better in interviews while wearing their school uniform."

"I see."

"It's the same in the sex industry."

"Shut up, Kasugai."

I said without honorifics, as the three of us gathered.

Myself, Kasugai Kasuga, and Yukariki Ichihime.

"And I must say that I absolutely don't want to be sitting in the tiny backseat."

"You and your princess-like demands again....."

"That's okay, Hime-chan is small."

"Then I'll take the passenger seat."

After everyone got in, I made sure the doors were shut, and fastened my seatbelt. Turned the key, and off we went.

Our destination: Assistant Professor Kigamine's personal laboratory.

A few hours from the antique apartment is what I had been told, but you could never know for sure until after the first trip. Well, even if the trip were to take five hours, things would surely not be boring with this group.

".....Are you reminiscing?"

Kasugai-san said, suddenly and without warning. Well, not that this was anything new for this person. Suddenly and without any context was neutral for her, the usual.

"About what?"

"Last month. Sort of deja vu?"

".....Heading to a laboratory in a Fiat... I suppose it's a similar premise," I carefully chose my words. "But that sort of happening is impossible.

Assistant Professor Kigamine isn't undertaking preposterous research like Professor Kyouichirou."

"Researching not dying, was it? You could fold preposterous three times over. Though you could also say that it's rather hysterical."

"But this time we're just working part-time, and we're not going there to help someone. And the group we're going with....."

Last time, I went with Kunagisa Tomo and Suzunashi Neon. I glanced at the passenger seat and at the rear seat through the back mirror and slowly nodded.

Kasugai Kasuga is on our side.

That spoke for itself.

"We should be alright with this group."

"Hmm."

"I mean, this personal laboratory isn't supposed to be as stupidly large as that one, anyways. Something like it was converted from a clinic that an old acquaintance had been running, so it's like a slightly bigger single door house. I would call it less of a laboratory and more of a lab room? Though I don't understand how you people decide on that."

"Uh huh."

Kasugai-san shrugged.

"That's true, that's true. Even if they're similar it's like comparing a Fiat 500 to a Subaru 360....."

"That's completely different!" I couldn't help but shout. "And stop calling it a Fiat 500! Are you making fun of me, are you declaring war on me, Kasugai-san!?"

".....I'm sorry."

She apologized.

I got too heated.

".....And you know, if you want to go there, it's like the difference between the north pole and the south pole....."

In other words, on the surface they seem like similar things, and if you look at them from afar with subjectivity, there are no significant differences between the two, but as someone acquainted with both, they're completely and fundamentally different.

"Master," Hime-chan's voice came from the rear seat. "Hime-chan is in a tired mode, so may I sleep?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes. Sleep, sleep."

"Thanks."

"Sorry, I know you're tired from school."

"No, no. Hime-chan was just thinking of working part-time anyways. Master's invitation was like a delivery by a stork."

"A delivery by a carrier pigeon."

Kasugai-san corrected her so quickly I couldn't even react. I didn't think she had that capability.....

And not a shabby one, at that.

"It's after class, so I can finally get some crush-eye."

"You're right. Exactly."

Kasugai-san nodded.

No, wait. You should be correcting her there too.

That is so scary.

"Don't worry. No matter what happens, Hime-chan will protect Master's body," and then Hime-chan closed her eyes. "Good night."

And then she lied down on her side of the seat. I worried that her uniform would get creases for a moment, but I suppose that's what you would call being over-protective.

"What a good girl."

Kasugai-san teased.

".....Well, yes."

"What a good girl. Why is Ichihime-chan such a good girl," Kasugai-san continued. "I wonder what reason there might be."

"....." What are you trying to say? This person has a tendency to hold back. "Um... I'm driving, so could you not speak to me that much?"

"A good human being. In many cases, *virtuous* human beings are often generally deliberately *virtuous*. A lot of them are good human beings." Kasugai-san continued, as if my words were such a passing wind that they were not worth lending an ear to. "In many cases, good human beings that come naturally are just pure evil. Exactly like Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke last month."

"Please, spare me the talk of Utsurigi-san," I seriously uttered. "That person is seriously traumatizing. He shows up in my dreams sometimes. It's still mind-boggling that Kunagisa commanded eight people like that."

"Commanded."

"? What?"

"Commanded is a good word. Maybe the best of words, and no good word ever dies."

".....So what?"

"Nothing," Kasugai-san said and then she closed her eyes. "I shall sleep as well."

".....Alright then."

Is your brain running at 41 degrees Celsius?

Why do you always sound like you have a point?

It's awkward driving with your passenger seat being slept in, but it sounds better than having snide remarks all along.

"I'll wake you up if anything happens."

"Don't."

She ordered.

"If you wake this Kasugai Kasuga up, bad things will happen."

"Bad things....."

"Zzzzzz."

She slept.

Despite what she said, it's beyond impossible for me to do something as artistic as waking up someone who is not asleep. I'm not some elder sage.

I decided to focus on driving. Plenty of fuel in the tank. Miiko-san must have refilled it today. Really, that person takes care of me much too well.

"Inoji," Miiko-san said when she handed me the key to the Fiat. "I don't know why, but I have a really bad feeling."

"A bad feeling?"

"Well, you'll probably be fine regardless of how much I worry," Miiko-san said. "But even so, I think you should take the utmost caution."

"Uh huh....."

"That said, researching not dying sounds good." Miiko-san smiled with just her lips. "In swordsmanship, we only have the one getting stronger thing."

"There's nothing wrong with that, though."

"What is necessary for living?"

"Huh?"

"What is necessary for living?"

'Ummmmm.....?'

"To live, you must stay alive," Miiko-san seemed to say without emotion. "That's why, try hard to stay alive."

"Uh huh."

"Stay alive, and come home."

I nodded, but I didn't nod because I understood what Miiko-san was trying to say. I just felt the need to nod. There are not many that would surpass me at sensing these sorts of needs.

Incidentally, today, on the 15th of August, Miiko-san still couldn't find work and seemed to have resigned when it came to the scroll. If Miiko-san were to give up, my plans would also require changes, so I'll probably need to come up with something... but what to do.

After traveling east on Imadegawa, I turned north again on the intersection with Kamogawa. All that was left was to drive north for a while.

Kasugai-san and Hime-chan were both fast asleep.

Completely defenseless.

I personally absolutely detest showing other people my sleeping self and that largely held true even for humans I knew. That was why I had some level of sleep deprivation over the three weeks since Kasugai-san had rolled into my room.

Not that sleep deprivation is a problem.

But do these two not have that concern?

Sometimes, I do think.

That I do overthink a lot of things, and that I am excessively self-conscious and paranoid, and that perhaps, if I could take things less seriously, that maybe I could live with less worries.

As they say, choose not your friends, but your enemies.

Well, that can be called miraculous.

Or perhaps curious.

But despite all that's said and done, if you believed every person you met, you would also eventually have the rug pulled out from under your feet by someone somewhere. I wouldn't need to worry about such things if the world were truly filled with virtuous people.

And I wouldn't have become this sort of human being.

And something like myself wouldn't exist.

Ah, or perhaps.

Sometime, somewhere, definitely.

If you want to call that destiny or inevitability or karma or fate.

If that truly cannot be escaped from...

".....Maybe it is nonsense."

I didn’t have much confidence in my usual line.

Which was, of course, nonsense.

2

It was exactly an hour later that we arrived at the place specified by Assistant Professor Kigamine. Five o'clock in the evening. It was a pretty good time given the Fiat's horsepower. Five in the evening, the sky was still bright. I thought about what time it might be when we'd get home after going through the test. Hime-chan still had class tomorrow, so it'd be preferable not to be too late.

Saitou Clinic.

Read a small sign. Kigamine had told me to use that as a landmark, but that sign seemed to be very old and it was both difficult to read and on the verge of crumbling. Probably, or rather, certainly, that must be a remnant of when this place functioned as a clinic. Though when it comes to the word *remnant*, I think of it as a word that unconditionally strikes at your sense of nostalgia, so I don't like it much. When I came closer to the gate, I found a piece of vinyl tape posted on the mailbox with small text printed on it reading *Takatsu University Research Center* as if it were just to cover one's ass. It felt extremely cheaply done. Or perhaps you could call it perfunctory. I could imagine some people mistakenly coming here for medical care.

However, once you got past the gate, what awaited you was quite the building indeed. Two stories, like an above average sized single family home. It was built with wood, not concrete. Assistant Professor Kigamine had used the word *reconstructed*, but you could also simply say that this was preserved well. It was probably the inside that had been repaired.

I passed under the gate and into the parking lot.

She had said to take the right, but because I'm ambidextrous, I'm actually poor at remembering left and right. For someone ambidextrous, the rare occasion in one's daily life that one must distinguish between left and right was a defect that couldn't be avoided. I thought a little about how it must feel to be left handed.

The parking lot wasn't that spacious, fitting four or five cars at most. And in that not-very-spacious lot was parked a Katana and a Z. Prior visitors... or rather, one probably belonged to Kigamine. Yet assuming that's the case, what about the other? And they drove a type of vehicle, whether it be the Katana or the Z, that you didn't see very often.

Well, not that it matters to me.

I backed the Fiat into a parking space.

Kasugai-san and Hime-chan remained asleep.

"....."

After pondering it for a moment, I sounded the horn.

Both of them jumped awake.

".....Master....."

I was given a grudge-filled look.

".....Purple mirror purple mirror purple mirror...."

I was being cursed.

Wait, was that what she meant by bad things?

Granted, I am turning twenty next year.

"Let's go. Grab your bags. Hurry up and get off."

"Yes yes....." "Mmkay."

I locked the doors and then turned to the front entrance. As they followed, Kasugai-san stared at the building and Hime-chan glanced every which way.

The front door opened sideways.

It also had an intercom, so I pressed it.

After a moment, a voice came from the speaker.

"Hello."

Assistant Professor Kigamine's voice.

"It's me."

"Yes?"

"Umm... I'm here, as promised."

"Ah... I had already predicted beforehand that you would be arriving just about now."

"....."

Come on, you definitely didn't know who I was just now.

You're definitely just saying that for the sake of it.

"Well, please wait a moment."

Click, I heard her hang up.

We were left with a meaningless silence.

".....Not that it matters, but this is very analog architecture," Kasugai-san said behind me. "Not digital in the slightest. I feel like there must've been a little more care taken for facilities and equipment....."

"I really think you should stop comparing everything to Professor Kyouichirou's laboratory," I turned to Kasugai-san. "Everyone and everywhere doesn't have the luxury of the backing of the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"That's not what I meant. There's... something strange here."

"Something strange?"

"Don't you feel anything, Hime-chan?"

Kasugai-san asked Hime-chan, who looked startled before pondering for a moment.

"Nothing strange especially."

"Really?"

"It's Master after all, I thought we'd be pulled into another weird problem, so I'm a bit bummed. I don't see any traps."

"Traps....."

Or rather, I had no idea that was what she was doing. That must be why she was glancing every which way.

Old habits die hard, it seems.

"After all, I'm Master's bodyguard this time."

"You don't need to be so amped up...."

Well, Aikawa-san had called upon her directly, so I can understand why she wants to put so much effort into it. Anyways, I wonder what Aikawa-san's

bad feeling meant. Even if unintentional, she had used the same words as Miiko-san.....

Kigamine Yaku.

Aikawa-san reacted to that name.

The same way as the fox-masked man.

"....."

I see.....

Should I be wary of them, too?

If we have a connection.

And if we did not, that was all.

However, is that even possible.....

Is such a happening even possible in my life?

Is such a Story even possible in this world?

I don't know.

I don't know even if I'm supposed to know.

Impossible to calculate.

Impossible to calculate even if there is a conspiracy.

Rumble rumble rumble.....

The door opened sideways.

I had gone ahead and assumed that Assistant Professor Kigamine would show up there.

But a young girl appeared, instead.

Probably around high school age.

Long, black hair, with a light blue blazer and necktie. Was this a uniform for a high school... I couldn't tell. She had an appearance that would be described more as beautiful than cute, more woman than girl despite her age, with somewhat drooping sanpaku eyes.

".....Welcome."

The girl opened her mouth.

There was a lack of energy to her speech, like flat soda.

"I've been waiting. Please, come in."

".....Ah, yes."

For some reason, I was overawed by her.

She quickly returned indoors and I hurriedly took off my shoes. Kasugai-san and Hime-chan likewise entered the foyer and took off their shoes. The girl prepared slippers for the three of us and then motioned, "this way."

The girl slid open a sliding door after we walked down the hallway for a bit and then she shut it behind us. We stepped into a Japanese style room complete with tatami. It reminded me of the restaurant from yesterday, but of course, it was much smaller in scale and bland without any decorations. You could say it felt very old. The girl deftly prepared enough cushions for us all.

"I'll go get some tea. Please make yourselves at home."

With that, she exited out into the hallway, closing the sliding door behind her without a sound. We put down our belongings and then sat on the cushions.

"Who was that?"

Kasugai-san asked.

".....Um, I don't know....."

She couldn't be a university student at that age... wait, did Takatsu have any restrictions for skipping grades? She could be someone like Kokoromi-sensei... wait, wait, she was totally wearing a blazer.

"I wonder if she's Assistant Professor Kigamine's daughter."

"She has one?"

"Who knows....."

But Assistant Professor Kigamine didn't seem to be at the age to have a child of that age, yet she didn't look like a sibling. Plus, they looked nothing alike. I thought of asking Hime-chan for her opinion, but she was busy struggling with getting into a proper seiza posture. I praised her for her effort, but I told her, "you can sit normally, Hime-chan."

The girl came back quickly.

To be honest, I had gone ahead and assumed we would simply be getting green tea in some mugs, but she instead placed good smelling black tea in elegant teacups that looked like they belonged on a proper wooden tea table.

"Sensei is attending to another guest right now. I'm sorry, but could you wait a few minutes here?"

"Ah, no problem."

Another guest.....?

Probably the Katana or the Z in the parking lot.

I see, that makes sense.

"I'm Madoka Kuchiha."

The girl introduced herself, bowing her head.

".....You could say that I live here."

"You live here?"

Kasugai-san asked back.

"Yes... sensei only comes here to do lab work," the girl, Kuchiha-chan answered. "What would you call it... pretend caretaking? Because houses wear down when no one lives in them."

She referred to the assistant professor as sensei.

"So... what is your relationship with the assistant professor....."

"Do you people,"

Kuchiha-chan mostly forcefully ignored my question and instead asked back.

"Understand what this place is for?"

".....?"

"Understand what they do here?"

"Umm....."

"I heard it was *researching not dying*," Kasugai-san answered. She was surprisingly well behaved given that she was speaking to a younger girl. "I'm a zoologist, a biologist. I came because I was intrigued."

".....Hmm. A biologist," Kuchiha-chan seemed observant as she looked over Kasugai-san, then Hime-chan, and finally me. "And... a university student and a high school girl... a strange group. A university student... well, not that it matters."

Saying that, Kuchiha-chan wrapped her long hair around her finger. She wasn't very well behaved. It was as if we were no longer of interest.

"Can I ask a question?"

Said Kasugai-san to Kuchiha-chan.

The tone was as polite as ever.

"Go ahead." Kuchiha-chan nodded.

"Are you going to school?"

"That's a very roundabout question."

Kuchiha-chan laughed out loud provocatively.

If it were to me or to Hime-chan it'd be fine, but it seemed quite rude towards the older Kasugai-san. Rather than the arrogance peculiar to a girl, Kuchiha-chan's attitude was more twisted or faded, as if making fun of the world itself.

"That's the face of someone that really wants to ask something else. Well, I don't really care either way, but... I don't go to school because I don't have to go. Are you satisfied with this answer?"

".....Yes," Kasugai didn't change her attitude towards Kuchiha-chan, but only nodded at the answer. "Thank you very much."

"Kasugai-san?" I asked Kasugai-san in a whisper so that it didn't reach Kuchiha-chan. "What's wrong? Something has been strange since a while ago."

"...I wonder what it is," Kasugai said something vaguely. "Somehow."

"What?"

"I don't know what it is."

"It's very uncomfortable to hear a secret story being told in front of me,"

Kuchiha-chan said with a relentless tone.

"Can you do it somewhere else?"

"...Sorry," I apologized. "I apologize if you're offended."

"You."

"Eh?"

"You caught the interest of sensei." Kuchiha-chan's eyes seemed to blame me as she looked here, without an ounce of reluctance. "...The other two are extras, huh... she certainly looks like a doctor. I wonder if it's the appearance. Hey you."

".....What is it?"

"I know your eyes very well. Those eyes that don't think of anyone else. Disgusting eyes. Truly disgusting eyes." Kuchiha-chan smiled and mocked. "Eyes that don't put others in their calculations from the beginning, eyes that perceive them as an element of the scenery. More background than scenery. You don't acknowledge the will of others."

"That is..."

No matter what, at the first meeting, there's no reason to be told that by a younger girl. If Kasugai-san and Hime-chan weren't watching, even I would be saying offensive words.

"Others are replaceable for you. Everything is everything's alternative. For example, if those two were different characters, it wouldn't be a problem for you. Did I guess right?"

"You really are just saying whatever you want... I don't think about humans like I'm in edit mode."

"**You're similar**," Kuchiha-chan said in a mocking tone. "I see. Thats why... that's why you caught sensei's interest. But although similar... it's a terribly extreme form. The ultimate distortion, that's quite severely farfetched. You could even say it's warped."

"Ah, you, you've got a very big attitude, but you know---"

"Shut up."

Kuchiha firmly commanded me.

I was being controlled, damn it.

"Sensei will soon be here."

"Eh...?"

Immediately after Kuchiha-chan said that, the sliding door really moved.

Behind the sliding door was Assistant Professor Kigamine.

And Niounomiya Rizumu-chan.

"Sorry I made you wait,"

Assistant Professor Kigamine said to us.

"I'm sorry, despite having called you."

"Ah, no..."

Naturally, I had forgotten the conversation so far, and my eyes were fixed on Rizumu-chan. Kasugai-san was the same. Hime-chan... didn't know the appearance of Rizumu-chan. She didn't know the black hair, glasses, manteau, or the straight-jacket underneath.

Kigamine-san noticed our gazes.

"Oh, this is a graduate student at Rokumeikan University, Yukimura Touko-san."

"Ah. Aaaaaaaah!" Rizumu-chan raised her voice.

Stupid! This girl is an idiot!

In a quick decision, Kasugai-san and I suppressed our surprise and pretended to not know her, but this girl was!

Assistant Professor Kigamine, Hime-chan, and also Kuchiha-chan looked suspiciously at Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu. It seemed that even Rizumu-chan had understood. "Ah, aah, aaaaaah, aaaa..." and she was lost.

So, how will you dodge this.

How will you respond to this crisis, *Carnival*!

"...iuoe, just joking!"

It was the worst possible response.

"....." "....." "....." "....."

"....." "....." "....." "....."

"……." "……." "……." "……."

Silence mixed.

Ahem, Assistant Professor Kigamine coughed out.

"This is a graduate student from Rokumeikan University, Yukimura Touko-san."

Indeed, as expected of a faculty member at a national university, she dealt well with the strange behavior of the eccentric. Gracefully, she cancelled the time that had stopped.

"Just like you, she came to take the aptitude test as a monitor."

"...I see." I listened to the words of Assistant Professor Kigamine while being careful to not act unnaturally. "Weren't the monitors just us? It felt like you said that."

"Yeah, that's right... but, well, this girl is a special case," said Assistant Professor Kigamine in a somewhat poorly pronounced way. "I apologize for doing what I did. It was a sudden decision, but there isn't any problem, is there? I just thought I should have one more monitor."

"Sure, it's no problem for me, so I don't mind....."

"Yu-yu-yu-yu-yu-Yukimura Touko," Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu said with a shaky voice that still couldn't hide her surprise. "Ni-nice to meet you!"

"...Yeah. Likewise."

"Now... Kuchiha."

Assistant Professor Kigamine talked to Kuchiha-chan. Hearing that, Kuchiha-chan answered "yes" and stood up quietly.

"What is it, sensei?"

"Help me with the preparations. Could you guys wait here for a little longer? We're going to prepare for the exam there."

"I understand," I answered.

"Yukimura-san, you too, stay here."

"Y-yes."

Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu nodded and sat down in the place where Kuchiha was sitting before.

"Then, this preparation should be done in about ten minutes."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said so, and Kuchiha-chan, saying nothing, passed to the other side of the doorstep and closed the sliding doors silently.

Hmm....

In the end, it was the same impression I had when we met before. Assistant Professor Kigamine, a person like a robot. It was like she was just repeating preprogrammed dialogue. Of course that wasn't true, but the fact that she gave other people such an impression explained her personality to some extent. Counting the conversation we had on the phone, this was only our fourth contact, but each time that impression just deepened.

So, the four people remaining.

"....." (Me)

"....." (Kasugai-san)

"....." (Rizumu-chan)

"....." (Me)

"....." (Kasugai-san)

"....." (Rizumu-chan)

I guess I'll feign ignorance.

"Yukimura... Touko-san, is it?"

"Y-yes!" Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu, or rather, Rizumu-chan answered. "Yukimura Touko!"

I see.

She intends to feign ignorance.

It's the kind of guts that I can respect, so let's buy it.

Buy and resell immediately.

I'm the kind of guy who resells sold fights.

"You being a graduate student means that you're older than me."

"Yes! Of course!"

"How old are you?"

"22 years old!"

"You don't look like it"

"Because I'm dressing younger than my age!"

"I see."

"Because you're a lolicon!"

"....."

It seems she doesn't know the meaning of those words.

A little embarrassing.

"Yukimura..." I said as I plotted a little scheme. "If your last name has been Yukimura since you were born, then naturally you'd be able to name all of the Sanada Ten Braves."

"What, what?"

"Incidentally, I can. Saizou, Sasuke, Anayama Kosuke. The priests Miyoshi Seikai and Isa, Mochizuki Rokuro and Unno Rokuro, Nezu Jinpachi and Kakei Juuzo."

"Hyann!"

Rizumu-chan looked as frightened as a culprit who just had their decisive mistake revealed by a great detective.

"...Huh. But Onii-san, you only mentioned nine names, right?"

"Eh?"

"Who's the last person?"

"....."

It's not Youaltepuztli... is it?

I think it was a name like the great detective Masafumi.

"...Foolish girl. You forgot to count Sanada Yukimura himself."

"Wh-what! That's right! What a simple trick!"

This time she seemed surprised, like a police chief that was being played with by the thief.

I mean, aren't you a great detective?

"....Sorry, I'm gonna go out for a bit." I got up, grabbing Rizumu's manteau and lifting her up like a cat, forcing her to stand, and told Kasugai-

san and Hime-chan. "If Assistant Professor Kigamine comes back, please make her wait. I'm counting on you."

"Roger. Have a good trip."

"Master, do you know that person?"

Kasugai-san skillfully tried to look the other way, but Hime-chan attacked sharply. As expected, Hime-chan isn't just a dumb girl. I replied to Hime-chan.

"Well, something like that. I have a bit of... a connection with Yukimura-san." I made eye contact with Kasugai-san. "Right, Kasugai-san?"

"Huh. Oh, I see."

She acted like an outsider.

"I didn't know at all."

"Is that so....."

"After all, I didn't know about this perfect blend of crisp, refreshing, clear, crisp, crisp, clear, crisp, clear, moist, and refreshing."

"Is that so....."

Traitor.

I'll call you Judas Kasugai.

"Anyway, Yukimura-san? Please come this way."

"Y-yes."

I dragged Rizumu-chan out into the corridor, went back the way we were guided by Kuchiha-chan, and then got out of the building.

We moved to the parking lot.

When I arrived in front of the Fiat, I turned around towards Rizumu-chan, who came quietly from behind.

"....What are you doing?"

"Um... detective activity?"

Rizumu answered me with a cute smile.

Ah, really cute.

"Great detective activity?"

"Don't correct yourself."

"Hiyan...." Rizumu-chan looked up at me, shaking like some pathetic prey hunted down by a predator. Apparently, I looked like a bad guy. "I was just asked to by Mr. Fox."

"Mr. Fox...."

The fox-masked man.

That person?

Certainly, yesterday he apparently had an extraordinary interest in the name of Assistant Professor Kigamine. Yeah, now that I think of it, I didn't mention at the time that I was going to work here. So, I wonder if Rizumu-chan was surprised earlier.

"....After finishing your search for someone, you took a new job?

"That's right." Rizumu-chan smiled and answered. "Go infiltrate this laboratory, he said....."

"Infiltration... investigation...."

Becoming a Rokumeikan graduate as a means. Really, that's quite something. Someone probably asked an important person from Rokumeikan to write a letter of introduction. Well, she calls herself a great detective, so she must have at least that level of influence... Even so, that was only a story from yesterday. No matter what, it's too fast.

No. Wait, wait.

That's not it.

This girl's claim of being a *great detective* is no more than a disguise, and lurking behind it is....

Man Eater.

I stepped back unconsciously, one step away from Rizumu-chan. In response, Rizumu-chan tilted her head, "Hiyan?"

Rizumu-chan doesn't know.

What is lurking inside her.

That is the meaning of *puppet*.

"When Mr. Fox heard about Onii-san's story, I don't really know why, but he seemed to be intrigued. Conveniently, I was looking for a part-time job, so

I barely managed to fit in, but I guess that was unreasonable. And to think that Onii-san was here... I might be tied to Onii-san with an invisible thread."

"Are you connected via electromagnetic waves or something.. so, where are you sleeping now?" If I remember correctly, this area isn't her hometown. "Still living in a hotel?"

"No. My work has been extended, so I went to a certain place with Mr. Fox yesterday. He'll be taking care of me for a while. Hehe, the boss is harsh. But at the hotel, it costs money."

"Being a great detective is quite the plain job."

"If you say so...."

Rizumu smiled bitterly.

This seems to be a critical point.

"To begin with, what's with Yukimura Touko?"

"It's a pseudonym. It's a good name, right?"

"Hmm. The name is about summer and winter. It's a name that makes you think of an inconsequential character, so it seems to be appropriate for a pseudonym... I don't know why, but there's that nuance."

"That's why, please stay silent, Onii-san."

"....."

"It's between Onii-san and me, right, right!"

"What kind of relationship is that....."

Well, it's obviously better to stay silent. It wouldn't be good to say that there's a professional killer of the *Niounomiya* within such a short distance and alert Hime-chan. That girl, it's not too late for her yet, but it's not that stable and safe. In that sense, she's a dangerous bodyguard for me. But... it's fine if she's really working as a *detective*, but if it's the *opposite*, I can't really keep it from Hime-chan. Even if I keep it quiet from Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, what should I do? Maybe tonight, after returning to the apartment, I should consult with her.

"Well, it's okay to stay silent."

"Thank you! Onii-san, I love you!"

"But there's a condition."

"Lewd stuff is forbidden!"

"....."

Your outfit is far from sexually appealing.

"That's not it....."

"Mm. I understand. Be gentle."

Rizumu closed her eyes gently.

I hit her.

"It hurts!" Rizumu shouted. "Wha-what are you doing! I told you to be gentle! It's really scary to be hit when your eyes are closed, you know!"

"You're noisy."

This month, it's only been this type of person.

I told Rizumu, "you know," and then after a short pause.

"The condition is that, after this interview, starting from the 22nd for a period of a week, I'll be working with you, but if you're going to do **something**, I want you to do it after that."

"What?"

"Otherwise, I won't get paid for the job."

"Hah... then that means I can do what I like after that."

"That's it"

"Cheapskate!"

"Honestly, it's not like I'm not interested in *researching not dying*, but certainly for me now, money is more important, okay?"

"Yes, understood." Rizumu smiled. "Then it's a pinky promise!"

"....."

How?

Should I ask?

It may not be unnatural to ask now, but.....

That straightjacket under the manteau.

".....Hmm? Rizumu-chan. Then which one is it?" I pointed at the Katana and the Z. "Rizumu-chan's?"

"Yay! Katana! I love it!"

"Hmm."

Is this also something borrowed from the fox-masked man? Rizumu-chan doesn't seem like she's been just walking everywhere.

"I really love motorcycles!"

"Hmm."

"Speaking of which, motorcycles are called autobikes, but what is a manual bike?"

"....I guess it would be a bicycle." I replied without confidence. I never thought about that. "Do you have a license, Rizumu-chan?"

"Oh my, Onii-san. What are you talking about? I'm 16 years old!"

"....."

This Katana is a rather large motorcycle.

Ah... no, wait, wait, that's not the point!

How did she drive with the straitjacket!

"Ri-Rizumu-cha--"

"Let's go back! Before the professor comes!"

"Not a professor but an assistant professor... no, wait....."

Professor, assistant professor; police inspector, assistant inspector. While doing the usual exchange, we went back inside the building. We walked down the corridor and returned to the Japanese style room. Neither Assistant Professor Kigamine nor Kuchiha-chan were there yet.

"I'm back."

"Welcome back." "Welcome back."

Hime-chan and Kasugai-san were side by side on a tatami mat, lying on a pillow they used as a cushion.

Even though nobody was watching, this boldness....

It's not common.

"Master. What did you talk about?"

"Not much. I just heard from Yukimura-san about the electrodynamics of a moving object."

"Really..." Hime-chan was impressed.

"Really!?" Rizumu-chan was surprised.

"It's your field, right, Yukimura-san?"

"Y-yes."

"Please teach Hime-chan next time."

"Y-yes! Please leave it to me!"

Rizumu was full of herself.

As we took our seats, Kasugai-san and Hime-chan corrected their postures, and Assistant Professor Kigamine came back. There was no sight of Kuchiha-chan.

"Sorry I made you wait."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said with a formal tone.

"Now that we're ready, we'll start with a simple paper test... So, Yukimura-san, Kasugai-san, Yukariki-san, please come with me."

"Eh....." I involuntarily uttered upon hearing the words of Assistant Professor Kigamine. "Um, Assistant Professor Kigamine, I'm...."

"You're exempt from the exam," Assistant Professor Kigamine said plainly. "Hiring you is a decision that can't be changed."

"Okay....."

Is that okay?

I was called here today because of the exam, so when I was told that I was suddenly exempt, I couldn't help but be confused. In the first place, Assistant Professor Kigamine herself said that the aptitude test included me. Assistant Professor Kigamine, she's not like Hime-chan, but is it alright to trust me so easily? It might be better to tell her the number of people who have had painful experiences because of that.

But honestly, I'm not some old man that I need an exemption. There's nothing but garbage buried in the backyard.

"Um... about that."

And.

Suddenly, Kasugai-san raised her hand.

The eyes of the other four people concentrated on Kasugai-san.

Kasugai-san's expression was as usual.

Really, as usual.

"....What is it? Kasugai-san."

"It's hard to say, but I've decided to return home." Kasugai-san said that and stood up from the cushion. "So, if you'll excuse me."

"Eh... hold on, Kasugai-san?"

"Sorry, Ikki." Kasugai-san looked at me. "This is my selfishness, so you don't have to drive me back or anything. It's fine, I'll walk home."

"Walk....."

It would be a great distance from here.

She'll have to cross the mountain, so even when we return with the Fiat after the exam, we'll arrive at the apartment first.

"Did you remember something?" Assistant Professor Kigamine looked at Kasugai-san strangely. "If it's urgent business, then the aptitude test can be done at a later date...."

"No. That's not the case." Kasugai-san spoke in a very normal tone. "I just can't stand being in this place for one more second."

"....Eh?"

Assistant Professor Kigamine had a confused expression that showed that she couldn't understand what Kasugai-san had said. I probably looked somewhat similar to or approaching that.

"Excuse me for my rudeness, but if I were to express it more thoroughly, I can't stand to breathe the same air as you for one more second."

"What... Kasugai-san!"

"I have nothing more to say." Kasugai-san said without any emotion and bowed straight. "So then... how should I say this? Sorry if I bothered you."

And Kasugai-san walked out of the room, passing by Assistant Professor Kigamine. "Wait!" I stood up without thinking and followed her.

I almost crashed into Assistant Professor Kigamine at the threshold. She didn't avoid it. Or rather, she wasn't even looking at me. Not looking at

anyone, not looking at anything, she just seemed to be digesting the words Kasugai-san said.

But I don't have time for that.

I passed by her side and ran down the hallway.

After leaving the entrance, Kasugai-san relaxed. She was neither hurrying nor waiting for me, and was walking leisurely at her own pace while whistling. I succeeded in grabbing her arm.

"……I like aggressive men quite a lot."

"No! What was that just now!?" I yelled without thinking. I didn't mean that. "That, that was rude…."

"Rude? Rude. I guess so."

"……."

"But. I'm that kind of person. Always have been."

Kasugai-san turned around.

Her face was close to being expressionless.

Reading her emotions was difficult.

Rather, it was almost impossible.

I don't know what she's thinking.

I don't understand people's feelings.

First of all, Kasugai didn't seek understanding.

That's the difference between this person and me.

I don't care about others.

I don't care about the world.

I think so.

Kasugai-san also surely thinks so.

However.

However, Kasugai-san **understands that**.

As for me, I don't understand.

Self-awareness and self-confidence and perception and knowledge.

The difference seems similar and tremendous.

Me who wishes for despair.

Kasugai-san who is facing despair.

Different like the North Pole and the South Pole.

Kasugai-san doesn't float like me.

She's rooted in her understanding.

It's not a difference in level, it's a difference in stage.

"You know me well, don't you? At least I thought you did. It's just a whim. I'd be happy if you didn't mind. Maybe it's a question of whether I need to be happy about it too."

"No... but..."

"I like an aggressive man, but my arm will start hurting soon."

"Oh, sorry."

I apologized reflexively and released her hand.

Kasugai-san didn't try to escape.

There's no reason to escape.

However, there's no reason not to escape.

That's right... I had almost forgotten.

This person is nothing.

Truly nothing

From every angle.

By eliminating all being.

Sweeping away all being.

Truly nothing.

Absence.

Too careless of an absence.

Innocence.

Too sinful of an innocence.

".....Just one thing." Seeing that I was silent, Kasugai came closer. "Ikki. I think you shouldn't do this part-time job."

".....Why?"

"These words aren't to my liking but...

...I have a bad feeling.

Hmm... yeah."

".....Kasugai-san."

I had heard that from Aikawa-san and Miiko-san.

But now.

To hear those words from this person.....

Rather than the meaning, I felt that the essence was different.

"Sorry for the vagueness, but isn't that appropriate for you? Of course, also for me." With a slap, as if to encourage me, Kasugai-san struck my chest. "Well then, see ya."

"Oh... um. If you really want to return home, then if you wait, we'll go back together. It'll be night if you walk from here. It's a mountain path, so it's dangerous---"

"I'm happy or not so happy to hear you say that, but that's not good at all. It's not like I want to go home or not work. I just don't want to be here. It's not a reason."

"....."

"Please pick me up if you catch up to me in the mountains. You can ignore me if you want. Then, do your best."

"Do my best at what?"

"Life or something."

Kasugai-san pushed me back with her hand on my chest. After taking a few steps backward, I regained my balance while Kasugai-san turned away and started walking.

And she didn't look back anymore.

Without looking at Kasugai-san's back until it was no longer visible, I went back into the building .

In this way.

Kasugai Kasuga had erased her name from the cast of characters.

3

When I came back into the room, everyone was there.

Kuchiha-chan, who was missing earlier, was now sitting upright.

Assistant Professor Kigamine was also waiting for me at the tea table.

".....Master."

When it was appropriate, Hime-chan asked first.

"What happened to Kasugai-san?"

"She went home." I said firmly, but to not appear too serious, I lightened my tone. "Really, that person is so reckless... She's the culmination of planning nothing. It's not that she doesn't know what she's thinking, it's that she doesn't think at all. She said she'll walk home from here. Going over the mountain with such light clothing is crazy... well, we'll just pick her up on the way back."

".....Is that so."

Hime-chan was clearly feeling down. She wasn't really close with Kasugai-san, but Hime-chan was such a girl. I couldn't help but turn towards Assistant Professor Kigamine.

"About that. I'm sorry."

I apologized for the time being.

"It doesn't really bother me." Kigamine laughed at me as if nothing had happened. "I had predicted beforehand that this would be possible."

".....Then it's fine."

"But Kasugai Kasuga." Assistant Professor Kigamine said with a serious expression. "Speaking of Kasugai Kasuga, it's a name that I've heard of a little. Despite her problems as a human, I admire her originality and eccentricity, as well as her overall design. I didn't think you were acquainted with such a wise person who had once been a candidate for the Seven Fools. Honestly, I feel a bit sad. I hope it didn't hurt Kusagai-san's pride that you were exempt from the exam while she wasn't... but...."

"She's not that type."

This was true.

If you asked me what type she is, I'd be in trouble.

"This is the usual. Really, this is always the case. How should I put it, her personality is similar to a rolling dice... and also kind of elusive."

".....Is that so. I have no idea why, but it seems that she hated me.... Hey, Kuchiha."

The Assistant Professor looked at Kuchiha-chan.

"You, do you have an idea?"

"Who knows....." Kuchiha-chan answered with an unnatural smile while trying to hide something with deliberate gestures. "Sorry, sensei. I have no idea whatsoever."

"Is that so... Well it's fine. Most of the time, biologists don't understand each other." Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "It was really a blessing in disguise that Yukimura-san came. Because of that, we've secured the minimum number of people."

"Yes."

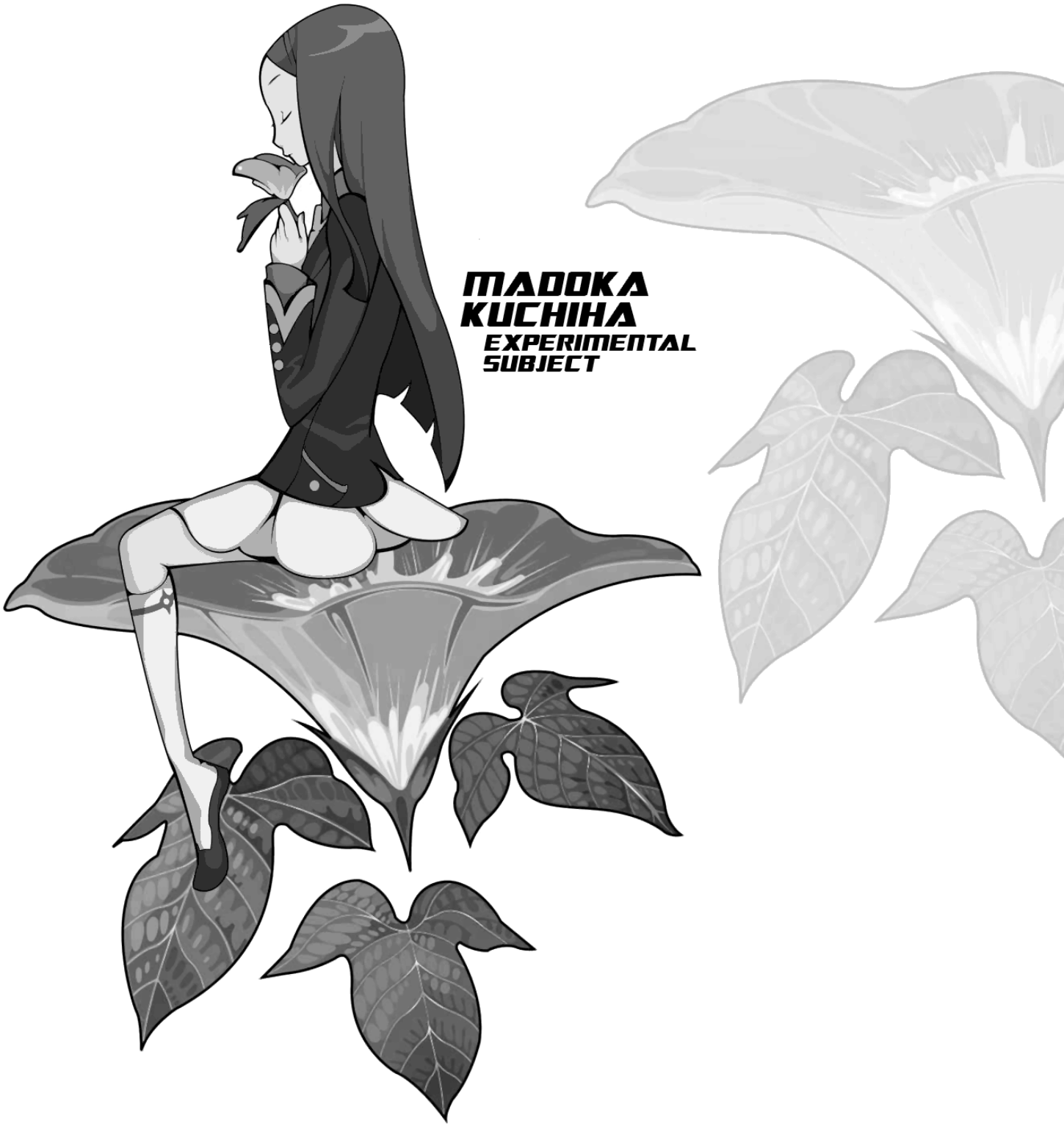
Rizumu-chan was smiling without care.

Wait, shouldn't you have predicted this beforehand.....

As I thought, you're just saying that randomly.

"So the exam will be taken by Yukimura-san and Yukariki-san...." Assistant Professor Kigamine stood up and said. "Then this time for sure, please come this way. If we don't start soon, we won't have enough time."

CHAPTER 5 — INCURABLE WOUNDS (UNSAYABLE WOUNDS)



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"I regret it."

"Then regret it for the rest of your life."

1

Natural.

Neutral.

A truly solitary person is probably, with just that, a perfect person. Speaking of how to define the term "perfect" in this case, the largest range is acceptable. If there is a concept that can live without any connection to the world at all, then no matter from what angle it's observed, it must be described as "perfect."

Perfect solitude.

Solitary perfection.

That is what's meant by "not needing to eat."

Plants can't grow without the sun and water.

If plants don't grow, animals can't be born.

Humans can't live without eating animals.

Without humans, humans can't live.

A person can't live alone.

Love, be loved, and eat each other.

It's a so-called food chain. To begin with, the world is all about eating or being eaten. Being truly solitary, truly perfect, is nothing more than trying to break out of that chain.

It's nothing more but an attempt to break out of causality.

In other words, don't eat.

In other words, don't be eaten.

Someone who won't become someone else's food, someone who won't make someone else their food.

Without wanting, and without needing.

That's why a truly solitary person is perfect. Truly perfect, and so, a very lonely existence.

Someone who has nothing to do with anyone or anything.

However, such "perfection" will die the moment it's born; it's an existence equal to zero, and it can never change.

It can't change.

It doesn't change.

It's dry.

Without any moisture.

"...That person is wise."

Kuchiha-chan said without preface.

"Name... what was it?"

"....."

I couldn't gauge the intent of the question, but I thought it was obvious that she was only just asking for the name, so I answered simply, "Kasugai Kasuga."

"Hmm... that's right." While hearing the answer to the question she asked, Kuchiha-chan looked extraordinarily bored, and said listlessly, "By the way, what's your name?"

"Since when did you start addressing me this familiarly..."

The treatment earlier was more preferable.

I was beginning to feel fed up with this girl called Madoka Kuchiha. What is it, this... what do you call it, this feeling **of indifference**. Well, I won't say that characters like Hime-chan or Rizumu-chan are common, but are all high school students like this nowadays?

.....Huh?

High school student?

Come to think of it, she said that she didn't go to school in response to Kasugai-san's question earlier, didn't she? Then why are you wearing a blazer?

"Answer the question. What's your name?"

".....I'm sorry, but I don't give my name out in public."

"What? That's stupid."

"Maybe. But humans, if they're living, have one or two things that they can't give out, don't they?"

"'If they're living.' Huh... you say some pretty interesting things. Sensibility is quite a good feeling," Kuchiha-chan said as if it was interesting. "Umm... Oh, yes. You were called *Master* or *Ikki* or something... so that girl, is she your disciple?"

"I'm a substitute... That girl's master is someone else. I'm acting out the role of a tutor, so it's not like I can't be called *Master*, but it's essentially different from what the word means. Well, it doesn't matter. As a guardian too, I'm a substitute."

Yuma Shisei. Jun Aikawa.

For Hime-chan, I am their alternative.

I have no particular thoughts about it.

It's just what it is.

"I don't really feel like calling you *Master*, so I'll follow Kasugai-san and call you *Ikki*." Kuchiha-chan said. "What do you want to call me? My recommendation is *Chippa*."

".....I don't feel like I'll get along with you enough to use a nickname. I'm fine with Kuchiha-chan"

"Kuchiha-chan, huh... that's also an outstanding taste."

Kuchiha-chan laughed.

It was freezing cold

It was the smile of a vampire.

".....It's nonsense"

Hime-chan and Rizumu-chan had been taken to a separate room by Assistant Professor Kigamine, and thirty minutes had already passed since I was left alone with Kuchiha-chan in this Japanese style room.

What was being exchanged was an unproductive conversation.

An unproductive, barren conversation.

To be honest, I wanted her to leave me alone.

Despite this girl's sluggishness, she never looked away from my eyes when she spoke to me. It's as if she was trying to see into the depths of my soul.

Kuchiha-chan said my eyes were unpleasant eyes.

If you ask me, Kuchiha's piercing eyes are much, much worse than mine.

"....Ikki... you." Kuchiha-chan said in a tone that seemed to be unaltered. "Do you want to not die?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Although our ages shouldn't be so far apart that I'd feel a generational gap."

"Does it seem so?"

"Huh?"

"Just answer the question. Do you want to not die so badly that you're interested in this fancy, ridiculous, fantastical, delusional, and ultimate topic of 'researching not dying?'"

".....That's, well, I'm somewhat interested in the research itself." I shrugged. "But my ultimate goal is just to get money. I need some pocket change."

"Materialist."

She said as if spitting it out.

.....Is it that bad for college students to work part-time during summer vacation? Even so, you have no right to say that as the employer.

"I can't help it. I need money, so I have to work."

"Pragmatic materialist."

I was scorned by that play on words.

.....

A bad pun.

"Well... you surely don't seem like the kind of person who 'doesn't want to die.'"

"I'm glad you understand."

"You have eyes that want to die," Kuchiha-chan said. "Hoping for destruction... not just your own destruction, but the thorough destruction of the world. Eternal destruction. The destruction of destiny itself. You wish for the destruction of destruction."

"That's...."

Far from being affirmed, I was admonished.

"My eyes are like the eyes of a dead fish, the eyes of a traitor, the eyes of a man wanting to die, and so on. It's hard being told all that, especially since I only have two."

"You... uproot and mix everything. Like a tornado. You end up doing it unconsciously, maybe almost consciously. I wonder if it's more of a crime of passion than a conscious crime." Kuchiha-chan showed no reaction to my attempt at self-concealment. "At least, you've always done that until now... am I wrong?"

"You know... I understand that at your age it's fun to talk like you can see through people, but you're entirely off the mark."

"Off the mark? Is that really the case?"

"Honestly, you're rather laughable right now. Just like an elementary school student who's pleased to have hit a home run in soft tennis. I don't know what you've heard from Assistant Professor Kigamine, but she seems to have misunderstood something. In general, most of the trouble that happens around me is a result of people overestimating me. If Kuchiha-chan doesn't want to be in danger today or through next week, you shouldn't talk about me too much when you don't know me. You don't have to worry about me."

"I don't even know... huh. Certainly, I don't know you, but I know a similar person."

".....Similar person?"

Earlier... didn't she say something like that?

Similar and.

"What's that about?"

"Let's see. In terms of character, *he* was.....

.....Humanity's Worst."

"Humanity's... Worst?"

"Do you understand? The meaning of being said to be similar to Humanity's Worst." Kuchiha-chan said in a nasty way, sending me a gaze that looked down on me. "Though... when *he* and I met, it was before *he* became the worst."

".....And I'm similar to how he was *before*?"

"Who knows... how was it, I wonder. You're not a child, so why not think about it for yourself?" Speaking in a cheery tone, Kuchiha-chan turned to face the old clock on the wall. "The exam, including the oral exam, will take about an hour."

"Hmm... oh, yes." The conversation took another turn. It was too abrupt, so I was left a bit confused. "Hime-chan and... Yukimura-san, right. Hmm, it takes that long."

"That's right. part-time jobs are not such an easy thing. The job being what it is, you can't really cut corners just because you're a monitor. Rather, you definitely have to take it seriously. It's pretty much impossible to be exempt from the aptitude test like you were. Do you understand how much of an exception you are?"

"....."

"And saying 'you don't have to worry about me'... you're astonishingly self-centered. You'd better redefine yourself a little more boldly... I would advise you to be more aware of what effect your existence has... That Kasugai from earlier seemed to have a good understanding of it."

"What about you...." I just couldn't stand it, so I tried to fight back. "What about you? Don't you think what you're saying is too harsh? What effect each word has on me... if you can't imagine it at all, then it's just due to a lack of imagination."

"I don't affect anyone."

Kuchiha-chan said extremely clearly.

"I know... you, follow me for a bit." Kuchiha-chan said and stood up. "You're similar to *him* so I'll tell you something good."

"Eh... Kuchiha-chan?" Something good? "No, we can just talk about it here....."

"It doesn't really matter to me or to you where we do it, but I don't want other people to hear. Japanese people have always been open minded, so they think that they've created a secret room just by dividing the space with these sliding doors, but it's delusional to think that such things as locked rooms exist in this world. I know, let's go outside."

".....I don't have anything to talk with you about."

"Oh yeah?"

Kuchiha-chan's gesture felt provocative.

I didn't take the provocation and, carefully and cautiously, spun my words with care.

"You know, Kuchiha-chan. Don't you think your attitude has been too self-important for a while now? I don't know if you're the caretaker of this lab or whatever, but being told all of that without reservation is tough for me."

"Scary, right."

".....That's not the problem."

"Then, saying it like this might arouse your interest. You, more or less, to some extent, have an interest in sensei's 'researching not dying,' right?"

"I guess so."

Kuchiha-chan stood up quietly.

"Hey, Ikki...."

Kuchiha-chan called out to me and smiled a bewitching smile not befitting her age.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"Here...."

"There's no way you know, right?"

And she laughed again.

....Why?

Why does this girl laugh like this? Why does she have such an expression on her face? Why does she speak like that? If this was a decade later, if she was an adult, it might have been seductive, but now, even if she does that.

The meaning can't help but be unbalanced and distorted.

Terribly improper.

Terribly unbalanced.

She.

"You know, Ikki."

Kuchiha-chan said with frightening calmness.

"My body can't die."

Without waiting for my reaction, Kuchiha-chan turned away, opened the sliding door, went out into the corridor, and closed it shut. For a moment, I couldn't respond, as if time had stopped. No, not for just a moment. Intuitively, I felt like I had been frozen in place for a long, long time.

Returning to my senses, I got up and went out into the hallway. Kuchiha-chan could no longer be found. Which way? She said she'd go out? Then it's the entrance. Thinking that this would be my second round trip, I put on my shoes and opened the door to the outside.

Even when I looked around the parking lot, I couldn't find Kuchiha-chan.

Huh... was it the wrong way?

No, if there's a front, then there's a back. I passed through the parking lot, passing in front of the Fiat, the Katana, and the Z (thinking about it, this was

too good of a spectacle to pass by. Let's take a closer look later) and slowly went around the building. There was a little garden on the opposite side of the parking lot. Even with inexperienced eyes, you could see that the grass had been cut and well cared for.

Kuchiha-chan sat cross-legged on a rock that had been placed there. She wasn't looking at me, but instead stared vacantly at the western sky that was tinted red by the setting sun.

It looked awfully ephemeral.

Enough to make me hesitate to call out to her.

It was a fragile sight.

"……Ah."

Kuchiha-chan noticed me.

Her expression looked surprised.

"……I didn't think you'd come."

"Eh?"

"I'm saying it's strange. You seem simple, but at the bottom it's really cloudy and invisible. I thought of you as someone who was very clever and wise, and who doesn't get involved in unnecessary matters."

"……."

"But you seem to be the type to stick your neck into ruin and destruction… or maybe it's your feet and not your neck? At least you don't seem to be like a cat whose curiosity gets you killed. Cat? I see, cats are good. Hey, do you know *If 6 Was 9* ?"

"I don't."

"I suppose. That's right."

"I don't get it. What are you saying? More importantly…."

"What do you think of this world?" Kuchiha-chan asked in a manner that didn't seem to be seeking an answer at all. "If you ask me… this world is a heap of garbage. A box packed with only garbage that can't be reused, a demon's yaminabe party in hell. Even Pandora's box seems cute in comparison. A fair trade that's not even evil. A prison of Babel where the

worst is piled up on top of each other. Above all, what's laughable is that this pile of garbage has a proper, rule-based collection system."

"....."

"Fate and inevitability and causality and destiny are... definitely foolish. It's a comically high-end model that is essential for this world." Kuchiha-chan said and looked up at the sky, just like before I had caught up with her. "I'm not sure if there is such a thing... even if there is, it's better not to know, right?"

"Maybe...." I answered vaguely, hoping to dodge Kuchiha-chan's words. "At least, Kuchiha-chan. I'll finally answer your first question now... I don't particularly want to die. It might be a bit different than not wanting to die, but that's the answer. It doesn't matter to me if I die, but I don't particularly want to die."

Really.

Why am I having such a conversation?

Ridiculous.

It's as ridiculous as a set of repeatedly solved problems.

How many times have I said the same thing?

No matter the person, I say the same thing.

I see, in that sense.

Kuchiha-chan has absolutely no influence on me.

"It's easy to say that you can live and die, but don't you need a lot of energy to die? No it's not really 'sufficient.' It takes either extreme violence or excellent skill to kill a human being. Did you know? Human beings can live up to 120 years. It takes a whole 120 years for just one person to die. If you have that much time, bacteria would have evolved over ten generations. It's not easy to make something durable useless before it becomes useless. At the very least, it's not an easy condition to clear just by wanting to die. It's natural to want to die, but things that can't die won't die."

"Even if the person wishes for it deeply?"

"If the person wishes for it deeply... it's not impossible. For example, jumping to death. If you take one step, you can die easily. Easy, easy, really simple. People can die so easily... You can cut your wrists without any problem. You can drink poison without any problem. You can choose what gas to fill yourself up with according to your preferences, you can do whatever you want. But the question is, **can you do it**?"

"....."

"People who can commit suicide are strong."

Most people....

Humans cannot die, they can only crawl.

Squirm, suffer, struggle in vain.

Just crawl along and live.

"So, according to you." Kuchiha-chan changed her tone. It was somehow soft. At least, it felt like the thorns were missing. "I wonder if sensei's research is meaningless. Even if you don't wish to *not die*, it's easy to *not die*, that's the reasoning behind it."

"Maybe... Don't take it too seriously. Are you more honest than I thought? You don't have to take what I say seriously. My words are, without exception, all just nonsense, after all."

"Nonsense?"

"I'm a nonsense user."

I said in a pretentious tone. Apparently, that pleased her, Kuchiha-chan coughed as if laughing. It wasn't as cynical as it used to be, it was just an ordinary smile.

That ordinary smile suited her well.

I thought so.

"It takes immense energy to die, huh... if that's the case." Kuchiha-chan lifted herself up from the rock and approached me up to the closest distance in the blink of an eye, so I couldn't argue about it. "If that's the case, then I have zero energy."

"....."

"You came to talk about that, right?"

"That's right... but what kind of metaphor is that?" I took one step back. Despite being younger, unlike Hime-chan and Rizumu-chan, she was growing normally, so I couldn't stay completely composed when she was this close to me. *Not dying*... is that something related to Assistant Professor Kigamine's research?"

"Not related... I'm not talking about such a trivial level. I'm that person's **research material**."

"....Eh?"

"Would it be easier to understand it as an experimental subject?"

"Experimental... subject?"

Research... material?

What kind of metaphor is that?

While I was confused, Kuchiha continued talking.

"Well... what should I say? Sensei wouldn't be able to continue the research without me... I needed a place to live and someone to take care of me. Our interests were both aligned."

"Matching...."

Resembling.

The laboratory of Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

Over there, a man was taken prisoner.

His name was Utsurigi Gaisuke.

He had a brilliant mind and a fearsome pair of arms.

And.

He was research material.

"....You have a look on your face like I'm doing something inhuman." Kuchiha-chan gently touched my cheek. Before I knew it, she had closed the distance again, but Kuchiha-chan continued regardless. "What? Do you have an acquaintance who had a similar experience?"

"No, there's... no such thing. It's just, Assistant Professor Kigamine...."

"**She's still on the better side**. Or did you think that Assistant Professor Kigamine was someone who appeared in the Bible? That's laughable." Kuchiha-chan laughed. It was very derisive laughter. "Expecting a scholar to have any sense of decency is... The desire for knowledge is the least violent form of violence, the worst kind of violence one can possess."

"....."

"But, in other respects, Assistant Professor Kigamine is a good person. She doesn't interfere. I really like them, those kinds of people."

".....Is that so."

"I guess it's a love-hate relationship, but... we've known each other for a long time. Besides, **this is a good place**."

"Good place?"

"I mean, a good environment. Hey, Ikki. You talked a lot about *death* earlier, but... well, I want to hear your opinion. What do you think it means to *not die*?

Kuchiha-chan asked.

I was asked for an answer.

This time, an answer was expected.

I thought and chose my words carefully. Since I'm the Nonsense User, I shouldn't fail to select my words here.

"At the very least... I know that *not dying* is not equal to *living*. I won't say that if you don't have a life with meaning and purpose you have a meaningless life, but... in essence, life and death are two sides of the same coin. That is, they're the same existence. I can't say that denial of life is death, and denial of death is life. At least, there are some conditions that haven't been fulfilled."

"That's a cowardly answer." Kuchiha-chan was still merciless here. "Answering a question with a negative is almost the most cowardly way of answering. In the end, you're not saying anything. Does Nonsense User mean coward?"

"That's not wrong, in general. But it's only half correct. It's an overestimation, because cowards can cry."

"What does that mean?"

"Lie if you stand, cheat if you sit, sophistry if you walk. That's what a Nonsense User is. If you do that kind of thing, you'll only about half reach into the territory of cowards." After taking a breath, I asked Kuchiha-chan. "So? What does *not dying* really mean? According to your opinion on a *deathless body*."

"To *never die* means to have nothing to do with anyone."

Without hesitation, as if she had prepared that line long ago, Kuchiha-chan answered.

"To have nothing to do with anyone."

Nothing with anyone.

No relations?

Complete solitude.

That is... not dying?

"All the time, forever, no matter what happens, no matter who you meet or who you leave, no matter what fate and inevitability and causality and destiny, regardless of whether or not such evil spirits exist, without relation to the flow of the Story.....

never changing.

That's what it means to *not die*."

"Not changing...."

"What were we born for? What is the meaning of being born? I don't have an answer to those two questions. That's a *deathless body*. No matter how much time passes, no matter where you go, no matter how long you go, no matter what you say, it's always the same. That's not dying... What you said earlier, that was really good. The thing about *death* taking a lot of energy."

"Why... is that."

"In the end, energy will be exhausted, right? If we follow the law of conservation, energy is generally *changing*, isn't it? Unless you have Maxwell's demon come out, having a certain amount of energy remain in a fixed state is impossible. That's why I have zero energy."

"No, that's a metaphor...."

It's a metaphor.

Then, **it's** not a metaphor?

Is that really a deathless body?

Ridiculous.

Too ridiculous.

What normalcy am I trying to grasp?

Isn't it me who is taking her seriously?

"That said, it doesn't mean you're alive if you have zero energy."

"So I just can't die. I just won't die. I'm not alive... so I don't die."

If you live, *you will die*.

If you're not alive, you won't die.

That is... easy to understand.

Easy and clear.

It's clear, but... even if it's clear.

"I don't get it. If Kuchiha-chan really *won't die*... if that's the case, since when have you been alive?"

"I don't remember." Kuchiha-chan answered with a bored tone, as if she's received such questions a lot and has become tired of answering them. "It's been so long that I can't remember... how's that?"

"It's a model answer."

"Looks like you don't believe me."

"That's right."

"Believing it or not is up to you... but Ikki, do you have any idea why you were invited here, why you've been exempt from the aptitude test and why you'll be receiving no small amount of money?"

She giggled and laughed at me.

It was a cynical laugh.

"It's a strange story. Aren't you being tricked by the word 'monitor?' Hiring someone who has no expert knowledge and whose field is different. I don't know what kind of reason sensei used to persuade you, but normally that's not done. If you think about it with common sense, there's no reason."

"The reason... Assistant Professor Kigamine heard about me from somewhere, investigated me somewhere... and thought I seemed interesting. Though, I think she overestimated me."

"Overestimation, overestimation... Can you only say the same thing? Round and round the same place. What are you, a clock?"

"You're good at making retorts."

"Don't tease me. The reason why sensei gives you such preferential treatment... it's **because you're like *him***. I can't say that you being interesting has nothing to do with it, but... before all of that, your career and your history, it's because you're like *him*."

"....."

"In that sense, this is an *aptitude* test. An *interview* between you and me. But you could say it's more like a police lineup."

Oh... speaking of which.

On that day, Assistant Professor Kigamine gave me various explanations but the fundamental point, **why I was investigated,** wasn't explained.

That.

So **that's what it was**.

"Similar to *him*....." I said. "You know, I've heard you say it a few times before, but... that *worst* guy. It's not clear at all, Kuchiha-chan, who is *he*?"

"Over there."

Kuchiha-chan pointed at the gate. When I didn't get the meaning of that, Kuchiha-chan asked, "Did you not see that sign over there?" And she said.

"I don't think it's something you can't see."

"Yeah... to see it or not, well, I used it as a landmark. Umm, what was it?"

"Saitou."

Kuchiha-chan lowered her finger and said.

"Saitou clinic... Saitou is sensei's mentor, or something like that. He was this clinic's owner before it became a research institute. That would be it."

"……..? That's a very vague manner of speaking."

"You're similar to that person."

"……."

Even if you say that I'm similar to a guy as vague as *the worst*, it's the same thing as saying that I resemble a demonic killer. Either way, it's just adding insult to injury.

"You look as if everything worked out as planned."

"No, not at all."

"But, as I said earlier... you're similar to how *he* was a long time ago. Before he became Humanity's Worst... **that's crucial**."

"……."

"That's the reason why sensei called you... it wasn't a whim. I wonder how many times she's willing to repeat it. That person, how many times does she really want to go through with it?"

"…..Then that sentiment... well, I'm used to being projected onto someone else. I'm an empty shell, so speaking of likeness, I'm the kind of guy who looks like everybody. That's a second-hand retelling of what a certain person told me, I myself am not really aware of that."

I'm a guy who's made up of a mishmash of various faults.

I guess I was said to be that way.

"Sentiment... it isn't that lukewarm or simple of a concept. That person isn't such a human being... such a goal can only be secondary. **That person's goal... is being achieved now**."

"What?"

"**For me to talk to you is that person's goal**." Kuchiha-chan said. "After all, didn't I say this was like a police lineup? Your brain is very well functioning and wise, but I wonder if you understand **that** meaning."

"……Meaning."

Honestly, I have no idea.

"**By talking to you who is similar to *him*, she's measuring the impact on me... or getting the information I'm hiding by being asked about that by you**. Is it easier to understand if I say it like that? What do you think?"

"What do I think... that *he,* with you... I mean, did you have a good relationship?"

"You could put it like that."

The expression on Kuchiha-chan's face at this moment was exquisite and indescribable.

If you were to force me to describe it, it was a proud expression.

A look of pride, almost.

I wonder why.

That expression... it doesn't fit the current *Story*.

It doesn't fit into the current context.

Wrong.

"At the very least, he was as much of a mentor for me as he was for sensei. He taught me a lot of things that were useful."

".....If so, then it's jumping to a quick conclusion. I can't think that of a university teacher. If it worked just because we're similar, no one would have a hard time. It's like saying you can eat dumplings while watching a tortoise, that's all."

"I agree with that opinion. I agree rather than approve. On the contrary, I suppose that's why she's so desperate... sensei is a great researcher and scholar, but it seems she's not as good as *he* is. Well, it seems that sensei had planned this operation for a long time, but there was a shortage of human resources. That's because it's difficult to find people similar to him, **even if it's before he was the worst**. Besides, it's not necessarily a bad idea. In fact, I've already said too much."

Then...

Then what's with that expression?

Uttering those words with that look on her face.

It’s completely mismatched.

It’s completely... zigzagged.

".....If so, shouldn’t you have not said that to me? If Assistant Professor Kigamine really thinks so, then I... wouldn’t it be better if I didn’t know that?"

"That’s true."

"Even if you noticed it as a result of insight... me and *him,* even if we do look similar, I don’t think I should be aware of that fact."

"That’s right."

Kuchiha-chan readily nodded.

"However, that’s not a cause for offense. I’m in sensei’s care, but I have no obligation to her. Using *his* existence in such a manner, can’t you say it’s cowardly?"

".....Hmm."

In the end....

She went to this courtyard to say that.

Until now, everything was just foreshadowing my arrival here.

It fit expectations.

It moved according to the strategy.

No treachery or resistance.

No criminal nor crime.

And yet...

It didn’t go as calculated.

If you want me to talk, then let’s talk.

Don’t leave the facts you know uprooted.

".....That’s a very complicated relationship."

You could say it’s love-hate. In response to my words, Kuchiha-chan made a face like that of an accomplice. "Well, yeah," she said.

"But don’t get me wrong. I didn’t forget that I am in sensei's care. As I said earlier, I don’t hate that person’s personality. I just don’t want to dance the way she wants me to, that’s all."

"Could you put it more simply?"

"It’s irritating that you’re trying to make things happen without my knowledge, so I wanted to bother you a little."

".....Like a child."

That’s right, Kuchiha-chan said.

"I’m not alive, so naturally I’m not going to grow. Not in mind, body, or spirit."

2

April.

On Wet Crow's Feather island, an isolated island in the Sea of Japan, where Kunagisa and I went, we met a fortune teller. It wasn't that simple of a meeting, but anyway, I met her.

That fortune teller's name was Himena Maki.

She's a pervert, a person that gets carried away easily, a heavy drinker, a person that laughs foolishly while hiding her true thoughts, a nasty personality, a person that loves money and loves to sleep. Blond hair in a ponytail.

But such small features are trivial. Such things are only an ephemeral distance from the truth. Ultimately, the word that expresses her, in other words, the word that binds her, is unique.

Supernatural power.

Yes, an abnormal ability.

Her ability is truly unquestionable, thoroughly and completely destroying anything and everything. She sees the past, talks about the present, listens to the future, and learns the heart of people.

ESP.

That too is the ultimate point that has reached the extreme.

In other words, it's the ability to read the flow of fate.

Perhaps it's the ability to read the *Story*.

"It's a useless ability," she said herself.

In reality, I can't tell whether that was true or not, whether she really did possess that abnormal ability. Perhaps it was all a lie and she was just bluffing. At least, in regards to how we can measure it, there's no point in measuring that kind of thing. How in the world can we be an observer of an observer?

Besides...

She didn't want to talk about the important things.

Kept her mouth closed.

Through talkativeness, she defended her silence to the death.

So.

However.

Even so.

Assuming her abilities are true.

Ignoring thousands of standards and piercing through thousands of contradictions.

If she had the ability to read the Story.

If that's the case, was she on the outside?

Not inside....

Just there without possessing any role.

Having nothing to do with anyone or anything.

Could you say that was a lonely soul?

"You're awfully spacing ooooooooouuuuuuuuut. Onii-san."

I heard a voice and looked up at the tree.

There was Rizumu-chan.

No... not Rizumu-chan.

It didn't have that black manteau on. A straightjacket with a design that made you want to look away, both arms were firmly restrained and were fully exposed.

And.

The facial expression was totally different.

It was a smile full of malice.

This was.....

It was needless to think which of the two this was.

"It's... Niounomiya Izumu! The cute professional killer! Yes, yes, yes, yes, heelllloo! Yeah! Gyahahahahaha!"

".....It's dangerous to stand in such a place."

It was hard to say that the branch on which Izumu-kun was sitting on was thick and splendid. And moreover, there's the fact that he can't use both arms. And, regardless of the mind, his physical body was still that of Rizumu-chan, which was thin. To say that one shouldn't worry would be unreasonable advice.

"It's dangerous, huh... Gyahaha. Is there anything more dangerous in this world than my head? At least here, there's nothing dangerous for me... gyahaha, besides, isn't it a nice view? Her. The sky is my birthplace, or something like that? I say good things! Gyahaha!"

".....And the aptitude test?"

"I'm done, so I'm just taking a break... though my *little sister* was the one who took the exam. Well, she more or less did fairly well, didn't she? It might be surprising, but *she* is a surprisingly smart person. Especially in science and mathematics. Gyahaha!"

He laughed out loudly without any reason. Personally, I don't want to see that kind of thing on Rizumu-chan's face... but once you start thinking about either one's ownership of the body, there's no end.

".....Onii-san's companion...what was it? Yes, Yukariki Ichihime, right? She's still taking the exam. She's an idiot. She might be dumber than me."

"I guess so."

"But."

His playful eyes rapidly contracted.

Too suddenly, it was a metamorphosis.

"She has definitely killed way more people than me."

"....."

Trying to lie... would be pointless.

His eyes were completely confident.

"Incidentally, the number that I've slaughtered at work has never surpassed three digits... because it's limited to one hour a day." Gyahaha, he laughed. "But that Yukariki is nothing like that... against her, I'm just a

decimal. An explosives user? If not, you can't kill that many at that age. For reference, I'm 18 years old and Rizumu is 16 years old. And this body is 22 years old. Her calling herself a *graduate student* wasn't necessarily a complete lie... Hey, Onii-san. How old is Yukariki exactly?

"Seventeen."

"Huh? I see. I thought she was just a junior high student. I can't say I pleasantly agreed to this... I came out unconsciously."

".....Unconsciously."

"Yeah. I'm automatic...well, not really! It's automatiiiiiiiiiiic! Gyahahaha, just joking!"

Izumu-kun's laugh echoed.

The courtyard....

Kuchiha-chan was no longer here.

She only said what she wanted to say. In other words, when she had achieved her purpose, she said "See you later" and escaped from my field of view. In reality, that wasn't really the case, but it felt like an escape to me.

It felt like I let her slip.

I thought it was no good.

The situation has completely washed away.

It may be the usual thing, but right now, in such a situation, it's no good to be swept away as usual.

It's too dangerous.

I need to do something...to reset and go back to neutral. No, that's wrong. I have to put the gear up top. Construct the best barrier I can build to get over this situation.

Calm down.

Somehow this development has become incomprehensible.

What are my top priorities at the moment?

Take it easy. Let it go. Don't think about the meaning. Don't rush to preferences. Don't worry. Stop thinking. Throw away doubts. Don't ask

questions. It's unrelated to me, right? Let's say it three times. Unrelated to me, unrelated to me, unrelated to me.

And even if it weren't... I'm not interested.

"....."

Okay.

Breathing was in order.

I could get my head in order.

I took a breath and was about to head inside... when I was called out by Rizumu-chan, or rather Izumu-kun, from on top of the tree.

"Um... Izumu-kun. Could you come down? It's hard to talk to you from that high up, it feels like you're looking down on me."

"Are you sure? I haven't killed anyone today, so I could eat you at worst." Izumu-kun opened his mouth and exposed his teeth. ".....Because of this body, I can't even look down on people. Onii-san isn't that tall either, so it's a feeling you understand, isn't it?"

".....By chance... did you hear that conversation?"

"Hmm?"

"That conversation just now."

"Well, yeah. But don't worry. I may have said this before, but my memory is almost never transmitted to Rizumu. The inconvenient things, I mean the **inconvenient** things about *my* **work**, are all entirely forgotten. It's an adjustment of memory... the recollection is altered, well, it's edited to some level."

Things concerning Niounomiya Izumu.

Things concerning the Niounomiya Massacre Group.

Things concerning the professional killer, the slaughter.

Everything is automatically forgotten.

Even the absolute contradiction of a *Niounomiya* searching for a *Zerozaki*, she can't notice it.

Even if it wasn't Kasugai's doing this time, the fact that money was stolen when she had *collapsed* might simply be because Izumu-kun had used it.

Falsification.

Editing.

Reorganization.

"Well, iiin ootheeer wooords, thaaaat's what I mean. From the small everyday level, to of course the deep stuff, it's a perfect oversight! From big things to small things, are we Brothers Yanmar? Gyahaha! The fact is, **what I do here** won't get transmitted to Rizumu. A memory disorder and fainting, that's the cause. Well, she's also a *great detective*. What we're talking about now, she could find out herself... Um, what was it? Knocking ten times? It's like that thing about 'a detective shouldn't discover the truth by accident.'"

"And that's fine for you?"

"It's fine for a professional killer."

"Hmm."

Well, I guess it's not bad.

I mean, a professional killer itself is bad.

According to common sense.

But.

Does it really make sense to follow common sense here?

"Oh, by the way, the 'knock ten times' earlier was a pun off of 'Knox's Ten Commandments.'"

"Don't explain."

I retorted to the killer.

You can't quite underestimate me.

"Ah... you still haven't healed that wound on your cheek, have you? I heard from Rizumu that you cut your hair, but...."

"You said that what you know can't be conveyed to Rizumu, but the opposite is true. That's why the information isn't interactive."

"The transmission from Rizumu to me isn't a hundred percent either. I heard about the hair over the **phone**. If you don't split it perfectly to some extent, you'll **get dragged along**."

".....An artificial split personality."

"Oh? What, did you study it? Oh, is your source of information Yukariki Ichihime? Wonderful, wonderful."

"Wait a minute, that's not it."

This is bad.

This guy's intuition is as good as a great detective's.

At any rate, the thing that I want to avoid the most is a conflict between Hime-chan and this non-Rizumu *Man Eater*. I don't think Hime-chan would be defeated, but that girl... I don't want her to participate in that kind of thing. In fact, I didn't even want to bring her here. In the first place, even if not, Hime-chan still... hasn't cut ties. She hasn't cut ties with her old habits. Despite following Aikawa-san's words, I never thought the situation would be like this.

".....The Niounomiya are absurd. Giving birth to an existence like yourself isn't something you would think of normally"

"Hmm. I'm not so sure. *We,* Rizumu and I, are a product, or rather a byproduct, of the *Niounomiya*. It might not be bad to get to the point of that hateful *Fragment*.... Oops, I said too much. Or did you also maybe hear about *Fragment* from Yukariki?"

"Ah, no, no...."

I grew confused.

It's bad.

Touching upon Hime-chan is bad.

It may be forced, but anyway, let's divert.

".....The fact that you appeared here... does it mean that Rizumu-chan's *work* is really a sham?"

I asked Izumu-kun directly, but asking such a thing is pointless. It won't deviate the subject. Even if it's a joke to the *professional killer*. A member of the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe. The amount of confidentiality and secrets they have to keep to themselves is as high or higher than a doctor, lawyer, or even a great detective.

"Kigamine Yaku and Kuchiha Madoka."

Izumu-kun said.

"I was told that these two people should be disposed of."

.....

Loose-lipped.

Aperture!

".....No, the aperture is different."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Oh, sorry...." Of course he won't get it. "More importantly, by whom?"

"Hey hey hey hey hey hey hey. C'mon, Onii-san. No matter how much you're Rizumu's benefactor, I can't reveal the name of a client."

"At this point you've already revealed the name of the target...."

"Well, as far as I can tell, it's Mr. Fox. You met him yesterday, right? That unpleasant masked man."

"....."

If sometime later in my life I hate someone enough to want to kill them, I wouldn't ask this guy. I'd be immediately arrested for instigating murder.

"Fox...."

The fox-masked man.

Rizumu-chan's client... was also him.

"Rizumu-chan's *job*.... then it really is a sham." I became lifeless. When I thought of that admirable Rizumu-chan I saw in the parking lot earlier, that it was all based on a lie... even if you weren't me, even if you were me, you'd be trapped in emptiness."Then... that fox-masked man is naturally aware of you. Not as brother and sister, but as a person."

"We've been something like raised by that guy recently... It seems he isn't going to move openly. I don't know much about it... it seems that Rizumu also doesn't know that much either, but, well, it doesn't matter. So, *we are* that Mr. Fox's limbs, his arms and legs or something. In that sense, the *Great Detective*, Rizumu, is full of useful information, right? It's not like everything was a lie. It seems like her journey to find the youngest child of the Zerozaki didn't bear fruit. Hmm. Zerozaki Hitoshiki. An unpleasant guy."

He murmured, the latter mostly to himself.

"But you're right about this one. When it comes to work, Man Eater is the main and Carnival is the sub... Naturally, she's the one that carries out the intelligence gathering. First, Rizumu *investigates*, and according to the results of her investigation, Izumu does the *killing*. That's the usual modus operandi for *us*. Oh, don't worry. I'm not saying we'll do something today just yet. Since you looked after Rizumu, I'll wait until the part-time job ends like you asked of her, as long as it's not a problem."

"I hope so."

I sighed.

Ah, what the hell.

Not related to me, not related to me.

It has nothing to do with me.

I know already.

Kigamine Yaku.

Madoka Kuchiha.

The professional killer's targets.

I asked Rizumu-chan the same thing.

".....Why did Mr. Fox ask you and Rizumu-chan to do that? To kill those two people, even though... Rizumu-chan said that *he seemed to be interested* in them."

"Who knows. I don't know. I'm to kill them and that's all, I do it in a way that follows the client's intentions."

".....You're the worst professional killer."

"The worst... that's a synonym for Zerozaki. Although... the etymology is different isn't it. Hmm? Wait a minute. The Saitou East Clinic... Oh? Oh, oh, oh... ooh?"

Izumu-kun tilted his head, becoming more and more sideways until, finally, he lay sideways on that branch that could by no means be called thick. It was very dangerous.

"Hmm... ah, I see. That's what it is... Mr. Fox's situation is **like that**... Oh, I didn't notice. No, I don't particularly care, it doesn't matter at all. I guess that person is also having a hard time...."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking to myself. By the way, Onii-san. Is one okay?"

"Eh?"

"I have only received questions. I was asked questions by you and I explained the obscure and hard to understand parts for the sake of introductions, right?"

"Well, I guess so, but...."

"I want to ask one."

Izumu-kun said.

"Is that okay?"

"It's fine... what is it?" I was full of caution, but I put up a bold front and responded to Izumu-kun, who was lying down, with a question. "I can't carry out the wish of a *man* without hearing its contents. Why would a murderer carry my palanquin?"

"Gyahahahahaha! To say such a thing." After making just one move, I got laughed at. "Why should I work with someone lower than myself? Don't you know about the equity theory?"

"Things are how they are, so I won't argue with you about that."

"My request is," Izumu-kun said. "After this, you and Rizumu... I mean, it's also me, but not me, just Rizumu, can you become friends with each other?"

".....Eh?"

"**She** doesn't have any friends at all."

He raised himself up from the branch and straightened his posture. Suddenly, he bent his back and was now hanging upside down with his legs hooked. By doing so, the position of both my and Izumu-kun's heads were almost at the same height.

"Well, it's mostly my fault, but **she** has many eccentricities. I can't speak for other people, but after all, Rizumu is an artificial personality, so the eccentricities stand out."

"....."

"Not to mention, she's also a *great detective*... but you seem to be affected by such things. It looks like you're able to successfully get along with Rizumu."

"No, I'm pushing myself quite a bit...." I responded to Izumu-kun with a feeling of regret. "Well, I'm used to being with weirdos... but in regards to the occupation of a *professional killer,* let's see, I have a friend who's a demonic killer, so I'm partly used to it."

"That's good for you, but...."

Izumu-kun said while hanging upside down.

"The true horror of murder... you can't truly understand it unless you're on the side of the killer or the one being killed. If you're a bystander, even if you think you've grown accustomed to it, you'll just get swept out from under your feet. In that sense, it gives the impression like you're half-baked."

"That is... thank you. For the info."

The side of the killer.

The side of the killed.

If you've lived a life where you've never been either... well, that's really nice.

That is, however, unfortunately unfortunate.

"Anyway, what about you? Mr. Fox seems to somewhat like you... luckily for you,"

"It looks like there's a connection."

.....A connection?

What's that about?

Is it fashionable? That phrase.

At least locally.

".....Well, it's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know about friends, but... I think Rizumu-chan is an interesting girl to tease. If we can socialize more in the same way, then it's no problem."

"Thank you so much. You'll make me shed tears."

"But I have one condition." Just as I had said to Rizumu-chan a moment ago, I said to Izumu-kun. "Not just **here**, but **from now onward**, I don't want you to kill anyone in front of me."

"Huh? What's that?"

"I don't like it. People dying."

Izumu-kun stared at me blankly.

The metaphor is backwards, but it was like preaching to the Buddha.

Still, I continued.

"I'd like you to do it in a place that's unrelated to me... I don't like it when people die in a place connected to me... it makes me feel depressed."

".....Feel depressed, hey...."

Without using his arms (obviously), Izumu-kun spun around with just the power of his legs and stood in a well-balanced position on the branch. And then... he looked down at me and laughed.

"Who do you think I am? The 18th member of the Massacre Magic group, the Niounomiya Troupe, the product of the 13th experiment, right? Regardless of whether the target is related or unrelated, if the target resists or doesn't resist, if the target has connections or lacks connections, eating until nothing is left, the professional killer among professional killers, Izumu the *Man Eater*. To stray from killing the ones I must kill would mean starvation."

"....."

"Gyahaha." Izumu-kun laughed a little.

"But... well, I can promise that much. To begin with, I rarely come out except when I am at work... It doesn't seem like there'll be an opportunity for me to work in front of you in the future."

".....Why."

I took a step forward.

Just one more step, let's go deeper.

Take the risk and get closer to the truth.

"So why *now*?"

"Huh?"

"Now... why are you in front of me? If your job is to wait until after Rizumu-chan finishes investigating, then there's no reason for you to appear in front of me now. You said you were worried about Hime-chan, but I can't imagine that you would need to risk so much for that reason alone."

"....."

"So you showing up *now* means nothing for your work."

On the contrary, it can be said to have the opposite effect.

If anyone were to see this place... if Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan who are the *targets* were to see, it would be decisive.

There's no reason.

Or does he have some plan?

If so, what is it?

Something worth the risk.

Something that can be traded for risk.

".....Well, yeah."

Izumu-kun said, as if he didn't know the answer himself and was speaking while thinking, looking for an even higher heaven while speaking from the highest point.

".....Oniisan. Do you know what it means to be strong?"

"Strong...."

"It's not the same thing as what you talked about with Madoka, but... *not dying* is not the same thing as *living*, and *strong* doesn't mean *not weak*.

Excessive strength will inevitably involve weakness. You're respectable, so you probably don't know this, but, for example, in my world there's a being called the Death Colored Crimson."

"Death Colored Crimson ...?"

Certainly, it's a name I've never heard of.

Does Hime-chan know about it?

"That person is so strong that it's stupid to think about, but that doesn't mean that person has a 100 percent success rate at work. Rather, their achievement rate is somewhat low for the stage that they're at. Probably lower than mine. Do you know why?"

"So... in other words, because you're *strong*, your opponents are overly cautious? That... before you can accomplish your *work,* they escape or possibly surrender...."

"That's right. Extraordinary strength goes beyond being a threat and just becomes a risk. If your strength reaches an outrageous level and you're already a disaster of an existence... before long, things such as victory and defeat won't materialize for you. I'm not talking about equity theory, but in order to decide the outcome, who wins and who loses, you need to implement the game first. *Winning* and *losing* need to be fair. In other words, a being that is too dangerous *cannot win*."

".....I see." I nodded. "Speaking in terms of **this world**, it's the same assumption with nuclear weapons and other such arms. Come to think of it, I've heard it before. *If you're too strong*, *you can't get serious*. If you're too strong, there's no opposition. Because there's no opposition, there's no balance."

"Umm? Ha, haha, balance. Well, there are guys like you around who say such sensible things. Gyahaha! Amusing, amusing."

"....."

This guy laughs a lot.

Rizumu-chan is the same.

I don't understand the feelings of someone who laughs without reason.

There's no meaning to a smile.

"If I go there... well, I'm quite biased towards *strength*. That's how I was created. To be honest, I haven't even seen the *Death Colored Crimson*, but... yes, being too strong is the same as being too weak. The strongest and the weakest commute."

Strong is weak, weak is strong....

Izumu-kun made a play on Shakespeare.

"I'm not saying something lukewarm like there being a paper-thin difference between strength and weakness. Strength and weakness are two sides of the same coin. That's why you need a precise sense of balance. *Weakness* has a negative image preceding it. We're not wary of the weak... they're not regarded as something dangerous. And if you're aware of the weakness, you'll let your guard down. It can become deadly. If you have nothing to protect, you don't have to defend yourself. If you have nothing, you can be greedy. If you have abandoned everything, you won't despair. If you run last, you won't get shot from behind. You'll be able to see everyone without being seen by anyone. Create a chink in the human heart. Strong is weak, weak is strong, but of course it's not enough to just be weak. You need a balance between weak and strong... like yin and yang. Light and dark, positive and negative...."

"That's... you and Rizumu-chan."

"Yeah, yeah. *Man Eater* and Carnival." Izumu-kun said really happily. "In short, this me... well, **this body** possesses *strength* and *weakness* separately. Rizumu is entirely in charge of my weakness."

"....."

Multiple personalities.

Artificial Dissociative Identity Disorder.

An artificial personality....

Isn't it just Rizumu-chan?

It's not one plus one is two.

It's one divided by two is two halves.

"Well this is just one of the experimental trials of the The Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe... to catch the byproduct? It's too much trial and error for one to understand. I don't know if I'm a success, but at least I tower above the rest when it comes to *strength*, to the extent where I can't *control* myself if I don't wear these clothes."

"....."

Finally....

I understood the reason for that straightjacket.

But there was no sense of accomplishment. Here... at this point, at this point, we were at the stage where such a thing, such an extremely trivial thing, no longer mattered.

"As I am now... I'll even surpass the *Death Colored Crimson*, so one way or another, I want some chance to compete with them, but to borrow Mr. Fox's word's, finding such a fate between the *Death Colored Crimson* and me seems to be so difficult as to be impossible... But setting that aside," Izumu-kun said. "I'm not so inhuman that I feel nothing for Rizumu, who's in charge of my weakness... After all, she's basically my younger sister, and before that, myself. "

".....Younger sister... and yourself, huh."

"It's rare to see her be **continuously** lively like when she's with you, that Kasugai, or that young girl. All I see is that she's always rejected, hurt, and above all, she forgets it all in a flash, that poor figure of Rizumu."

"Forgets...."

"Rizumu, who's in charge of my *weakness*, forgets even her own wounds. If she gets hurt and the wound remains and she stops coming into contact with other people, she won't be able to carry out her role as *Carnival*."

"Role...."

Falsification of memory. Editing of memory.

All inconvenient things are forgotten.

It all fits coherently in her mind.

Her world is closed.

"No matter how much she's hurt, no blood will flow from those wounds. It's laughable, laughable. Weak, weak, too weak."

".....Yeah"

It's....

Too weak.

I don't know such a poor weakness.

Specialized in weakness, Cannibal.

Such a poor weakness....

I don't know anyone but myself.

"Mr. Fox's handling of Rizumu is still preferable, but Mr. Fox isn't the type to *make friends with*."

"Hmmm... but if it's Rizumu-chan, I feel like she could truly, truly, truly get along with anyone, even if it's not with me. Of course, she has a lot of eccentricities, but if you can accept them...."

"Sure, she's skilled at socializing. That carefree idiot can completely ignore all the twists and troubles of human relationships, even without having her memory rewritten. She can make a forced smile amiable. That's also the privilege of *weakness*... for the sake of the investigation, it's the privilege of weakness. But..."

Izumu-kun corrected his words.

"In the end, that's temporary."

"Temporary."

"It's hollow. If I come out, it's over."

".....Ah"

Professional killer.

The Massacre Magic Group.

The Niounomiya Troupe.

Yes, basically, that's it.

No matter what kind of character Rizumu-chan is....

There's no changing that she's a cannibal.

The transience shuts there.

Everything turns hollow.

The possibility of knowing everything and still staying at Rizumu-chan's side without hurting her, how likely is it?

Knowing everything.

And yet not changing.

If there's anyone who can stay the same.

"So... I'm the one, huh."

"I'm fine. I'm a professional killer, I don't need friends. I don't curry favors with anyone, and I don't bend to anyone. I live relying on my own abilities. That's fine... but she's not on this side, right? Don't you think that being treated like me would be a bit lonely?"

".....It would be."

That's the reason why he came out *now*.

The meaning of why he appeared before me.

If he missed this opportunity, it's true that Izumu-kun and I wouldn't see each other again. If Izumu-kun is aware of Hime-chan, then he can't afford to talk in the building.

"For me, Rizumu is a *puppet*, a *shadow*, a *place to hide*, or a remote-controlled autonomous RC... before that, she's also my *younger sister*. Only, what can I do for her? She's my helpless younger sister."

".....Siscon."

"Basically."

Gyahaha, Izumu-kun laughed.

"Your terms, I'll accept them... I'll make a contract with you. I won't kill in front of you for any reason besides self defense. The hour of slaughter will be for when you're not present, instead"

"I understand. But as I said, I don't particularly plan on changing how I deal with Rizumu-chan... it'll be just as it's been."

"That's fine. The only thing I'm expecting from you is that you *don't change* too much."

"Don't change... right."

"So, Onii-san, erotic things are also prohibited, yeah? Yeah! Whoo!!" Gyahaha, Izumu-kun laughed. "Yo, yo, yo! If I feel pain above a certain threshold, if I feel a sense of crisis, I'll come out automatically."

".....That worry is useless."

"Gyahaha! Hey. Then, Onii-san, on that note, the contract has been concluded."

"Ah... then I'll head back inside, but what about you?"

"Hmm... that's right. Yeah, yeah... let's have a time delay for when we get back. It'll be suspicious if we return together. I'll **withdraw**."

"Yeah. That might be a good idea. Hmm... I might never see *you* again...."

I hesitated a bit, but then, with a little bit of embarrassment, I decided to say it anyway.

"If we have a connection, let's meet again."

3

One of the works of Grimms' Fairy Tales is titled "Brother and Sister." As a fairytale, it has a standard and orthodox structure. A long time ago, there was an older brother and a younger sister. Naturally, their mother is dead, and naturally, they're abused by the stepmother, and after being unable to endure the severe abuse, they run away and conceal themselves within a sea of trees. But the malicious stepmother magically creates a spring in the sea of trees, and when the brother drinks the water from the spring, he turns into a stupid deer.

And, of course, the ending is a happy ending.

The brother and sister lived happily together forever.

However, there's no one who doesn't think of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" when they hear this story. To be honest, I don't even want to remember how that story ends or what kind of brother and sister are in it. And I don't even want to compare the two stories and think about which one is more based on reality.

As a matter of fact, I had once possessed the existence called a younger sister as a reality, not as a fictional narrative, but that doesn't mean there was any story to it. Before I could do anything towards my younger sister, just one act worthy of an older brother, she had lost her life.

"A younger sister... certainly, that's an exceptional being."

Parting with Izumu-kun, I went around the building to return to the room I was in, but I stopped as I turned to the parking lot. Hmm, come to think of it, I wanted to take a closer look if I had the time. The Fiat... apart from that which I had frequently looked over.

The Katana and the Z.

I don't know much about motorcycles, but I do at least know of the Katana. A 750cc motorcycle... Aside from her young body's arms, it's difficult to tell if Rizumu-chan could reach with her legs. But really how do you do something like that in a straightjacket....

"....."

I guess it can always be taken off.

If you think about it normally, she could always have put on the straightjacket after coming here. There are people here like Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan who can help with at least that much.

No, even if that's fine this time, what does she normally do? I don't think there are people that kind everywhere... In the first place, setting aside the reason for the straightjacket that I got from Izumu-kun, it's too mysterious for Rizumu-chan to be dressed like that **without having any doubts**. The mystery just keeps on getting deeper. I wonder if that also has something to do with the reorganization of her memory. Her personality **was made** to not have any doubts about her strange appearance, is that what that means?

"....."

Next, the purple Z.

I'm a commoner, so if asked to choose between the two, I'd prefer the Fiat, but that doesn't mean I'm so tasteless that I don't feel anything about the coolness and stylishness of a sports car. I think that Mr. Fox's Porsche and Jun-san's Cobra are good... Well, even if I were to do a headstand right now, I can't afford to buy a Porsche or a Z or even a Katana. It's fine, I like the Vespa. I got it from Mikoko-chan. I love you, Mikoko-chan.

".....Hmm."

Looking at the sky, it seemed to be getting darker, as expected. That's how it looks here in the mountains, but isn't it already considerably severe in the mountains? Even though the road is paved...

I'm still worried about Kasugai-san.

She's always resolute, but Kasugai-san isn't particularly fit, is she? She might run into a stray dog or something... Oh, that person is fine as far as animals are concerned. But physical strength is still a problem. If she were to pass out just like Rizumu-chan, there'd be no one there to help.

.....Really, she's such a handful.

Right.

I'll have to catch up to her soon.

After finishing the small appreciation party, I opened the door and took off my shoes before going inside. I took the return route down the corridor, which I had already memorized, and opened the sliding door.

"Ah! It's Onii-san!"

Rizumu-chan was the only one there.

She must have gone on ahead while I was looking at the cars... as the *Man Eater*, I guess he went through a window or something. If we just believe Izumu-kun's words as they are, then Rizumu-chan's perception and Rizumu-chan's memory will be "I've been alone in this room since I finished the aptitude test." Something like that, I guess.

Reorganization, huh.

"Where did you go? I was lonely!"

"Hmm... I was out front looking at the cars in the parking lot."

"Huh. Onii-san, do you like cars?"

"Unlike humans... machines are easy to understand and don't betray... that's what a friend of a friend said."

"A car isn't a machine. It's a living thing."

Rizumu-chan said sharply.

"I'm counting on you for that."

".....Hmm."

It seems better to avoid discussion.

The situation could become considerably poor.

"How did you do on the exam?"

"Perfect!" Rizumu-chan had a big smile. "Probably the perfect score, ten thousand!"

"That's good."

While talking half-mindedly, I wondered where Kuchiha-chan had gone. I guess she has her own room somewhere... Now that I think about it, I still only know how to get from the entrance to this room. I'm sure there's a laboratory and a preparation room here somewhere, but....

But, well, what.

This has become somewhat complicated and troublesome.

.....

I wonder if I can cancel even now.

Then.

I heard footsteps coming from the hallway.

Two people.

"...I think it's a bad idea to leave the sliding door open."

It was Assistant Professor Kigamine and Hime-chan.

Assistant Professor Kigamine was as usual.

Hime-chan was exhausted.

Or rather, her eyes were dead.

"....."

"The exam has been successfully completed," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "Then, Yukimura-san and... Yukariki-san both passed...."

Although she was as cool as usual, her face twitched a little at "Yukariki-san," like she was in denial. I felt some reluctance.

.....

If Kasugai-san was here, Hime-chan would have failed.

Although now, for me, this selection of people was difficult.

"I look forward to working with you next week."

"Yes," I answered. "Hime-chan too."

"....."

No reply.

She was just like a corpse.

"Yes! I'll do my best!"

Rizumu-chan was full of spirit.

But she's a spy.

And a professional killer.

"Well... then what are your plans after this? If you have the time, we can have dinner together...."

"Oh, no." I refused Assistant Professor Kigamine's invitation. "We need to catch up with Kasugai-san as soon as possible. Even if it's her, it's dangerous for a woman to walk alone."

"Oh... that's right," Assistant Professor Kigamine nodded. "Then let me at least see you off... Huh? Where did Kuchiha go? I should have told her to deal with you here."

"I'm not sure. Onii-san, do you know?"

"Hmm...."

How should I explain it?

I could speak honestly, but... it seems like Kuchiha-chan herself wants that... well, me too.

Even for me, it's annoying to just go along with Kuchiha-chan's plan. I have no reason to do so nor any obligation towards her whatsoever.

"I tried to make a move on her and she ran away."

"Is that so. I see."

Don't be convinced!

Ah... Rizumu-chan is looking at me with contempt!

"I predicted beforehand that you would fail to seduce Kuchiha."

"....."

It's pointless to make excuses.

It's important for humans to give up.

I picked up Hime-chan, who was stuck to the tatami mat like ice cream, and carried her on my back. Hime-chan's body is very light. Now that her soul is gone, it's even lighter.

....Is there a weight to the soul?

"Well, excuse me. Thank you for your time."

"Yes."

"Ri-Yukimura-san, what will you do?"

I asked Rizumu-chan.

"Oh, I'll stay here and talk for a bit longer."

She said.

It seems she was going at her own pace.

Great Detective. Professional killer.

Well... it's none of my business.

It has nothing to do with me.

There's no need to worry about Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, and there's no need to think about why the fox-masked man is using Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun.

There is none.

It is absent.

"Then, I'll see you next week, Yukimura-san."

"Yeah. Goodbye for a short while." Rizumu-chan smiled broadly. "Well then, goodbye!"

"I will try my best."

And.

Exactly as we said, we parted for a short while.

About five minutes.

The parking lot.

Fiat, Katana, and Z.

A total of ten tires had been destroyed.

CHAPTER 6 — DISCREPANCY (WHICH?)

KIGAMINE YAKU

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

0

The loser dies in despair.

The winner dies in yearning.

1

"What! So Master, you mean you didn't cry even when you read *The Cat Who Lived a Million Times*!?"

"Yup."

"You're a demon!"

Hime-chan pointed a finger at me. Her expression was so menacing that I thought she was going to stick it into my eyeball.

"I was so nervous that I broke down crying after reading that masterpiece! Hime-chan broke down crying while reading at the bookstore!"

"Buy it."

"Then, then, 'Air on the G String!?' Oh, no matter how many times you hear that, even Master would be in tears!"

"Um... what kind of song is that?"

".....(speechless)"

"Oh, I remember."

"Did you remember now!?"

"That's such a sluggish song."

"Kee!!"

She hit me.

"Ba-ba-apologize to Bach-sensei! Get on your knees before Wilhelm-sensei!"

I suffered a series of blows.

It hurt quite a bit.

"But, I mean... don't you think it's harder to be impressed by something that has a high reputation or is famous for being first-class? It makes me put up my guard."

"Uuuuuh. That's not true!"

Hime-chan rejected my words with her whole body. I wonder if Aikawa-san's love of clichés has also infected Hime-chan.

"Then, then, then, Master, when do you cry?!"

".....When I use eye drops."

"Those aren't tears!!"

Hime-chan was truly angry.

"Uugu fueen!!"

Or rather, she was genuinely crying.

Don't cry.

"Oh, what about movies!? Master, what kind of movies have you seen!?"

"Hmm... mini theater. But basically, I don't go to the movie theater that often... I'm not a fan of major works. Come to think of it, I recently watched *Tale of Tales*[1] in Houko-chan's room."

"Keh! Stop being pretentious!"

"....."

Her personality changed.

Is that her true nature?

"Idiot! Master should've been moved by the climax scene of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* with the swarm of insects!"

"Master doesn't understand anymore."

I lay down on the futon. Geez...what is this? What's with my fate that I have to have a conversation like this like it's the night of a school trip? "At any rate," while looking at the ceiling, I set the topic's coordinates to a more reasonable location.

"It seems... like things have become strange."

---

[1] The 1979 one

I said so.

How, or rather, since when did the situation become this odd? Even when things weren't strange, I would've said something like, "things have become strange," but in this case, that was not a strong sentiment or a metaphor, but an objective expression.

"Don't change the subject! Even Hagihara-san says that people who aren't interested in the arts and culture are worthless...."

"No, this isn't the kind of scene where you can force the conversation from the introductory part to continue." Read the mood, the mood. "....Hime-chan, come to think of it, you've got make-up classes tomorrow. You won't be on time if we wait for repairs."

"Whatever!" Hime-chan boomed and clapped her hands in front of her chest. "That was all completely forgotten!"

"You...."

So your core didn't become any better.

"Now, now. Master, tomorrow's wind will blow tomorrow."

"It's not bad to say such an unusually accurate fixed phrase at this point, but today's wind can only blow today."

It was past 9:00 at night on August 15th.

Hime-chan and I were on the second floor, in a room that was probably used as a hospital room when the clinic was in use. Hime-chan was on the bed provided and I was on a futon on the floor. There's another hospital room next door where Rizumu-chan should be. Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan have their own rooms on the first floor.

Just like that, it was a sleepover.

"....."

It's not like saying it in a cute way changes anything.

Incidentally, if I were to put it in a not-so-cute way, then it's a stormy mountain retreat.

"I wonder what I should say to Miiko-san...."

Naturally, a punctured tire on a car isn't fixed the same way a punctured tire on a bicycle is. The location of this institute was too rural to get it repaired. The gas station was closed early and the repairman was on summer vacation. Even if I tried to fix it myself, the spare tire was thoroughly damaged, and even if that wasn't the case, there weren't ten spare tires in the first place.

Assistant Professor Kigamine said that it was probably a prank by the students of a nearby middle school (though it's a thirty minute walk). My opinion was that there was no way a middle school student would harass us with such care. Three people didn't have an opinion (Rizumu-chan, Hime-chan, and Kuchiha-chan).

However, after taking such an unproductive majority vote, we had no options.

Taking a taxi home from here would cost so much that I'd die. Taking a train or a bus was impossible. There was one bicycle, but it wouldn't be able to cross the mountain. It would be better to walk, but from now on, the entire journey would be during the night. We didn't have the guts that Kasugai-san had.

Assistant Professor Kigamine had originally planned to stay here starting from today to prepare for next week, and Kuchiha-chan originally lived here. However, Hime-chan, Rizumu-chan, and I were in a position where we couldn't say "originally...."

So we took advantage of Assistant Professor Kigamine's kindness.

.....That was the gist of it.

We ate the dinner that Kuchiha-chan made (which tasted so-so) and then took turns showering. It seems the place was furnished with a bath. The order was Hime-chan → Rizumu-chan → Kuchiha-chan → Assistant Professor Kigamine → me.

Hime-chan already finished showering and was wearing a long t-shirt she borrowed from Kuchiha-chan. Right now the one taking a shower is... timewise it's probably Kuchiha-chan.

Yeah.

That was the current state of affairs.

The situation had become odd.

In any case, this was a situation where I was taking advantage of another's kindness.

That was certain.

But I wonder what is it, this situation.

Somehow... it's *strange*.

Strange.

".....What did you think? Hime-chan."

"Yes?"

"Somehow... this is quite a contrived development, isn't it? It feels like someone doesn't want us to leave here."

"Is it? It may surprisingly be exactly as Assistant Professor Kigamine said. These days middle school students don't know what to do. When Hime-chan was a middle school student----"

"Sorry, but your story about your time in middle school isn't going to help."

"You're awful!"

"I'm not!"

I got irritated and retorted back.

Really, that is the definition of a shameless thief. I don't intend to ever forget what you and the other members of your high school (and Aikawa-san) made me go through two months ago.

".....Besides, in the first place, who'd benefit from preventing Hime-chan and Master from going home. ?"

"We're not necessarily the target. We may have just been caught in the middle, as usual...."

"Then who is?"

"Maybe Assistant Professor Kigamine or Kuchiha-chan...." Or the two *Cannibals*. "Maybe Yukimura Touko-san. And... thinking about the mechanics, it was probably committed by someone on the inside."

"That's how it is, huh."

"Yeah."

At the very least, all of us had the opportunity.

Not everyone was keeping an eye on each other.

It's not like there was always someone with someone else. Hime-chan and Rizumu-chan, who were taking the exam, or Assistant Professor Kigamine, who was supervising them, wouldn't have had the spare time, but they probably could've gone to the bathroom alone. And as for Rizumu-chan, she finished the exam early and **Izumu-kun came out**. Not to mention me and Kuchiha-chan, who had been free the whole time. So Izumu-kun, Kuchiha-chan, and I had a better opportunity than Rizumu-chan, Hime-chan, and Assistant Professor Kigamine.

"But what's it for?"

"Hmm. When asked that...."

Me.

Yukariki Ichihime.

Kigamine Yaku.

Madoka Kuchiha.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

Or Niounomiya Izumu.

These six... whoever you take, each has their own goal. Rizumu-chan's *goal* is actually just a means for Izumu-kun's *goal*, but even so, in the first place, the two are the same person and their relationship is an equal sign, so we don't have to worry about that.

But.

However.

What's going on?

This phenomenon... it's seemingly pointless.

It doesn’t fit with anyone’s goal.

The law of cause and effect has not been established at all.

"Somehow... it’s out of place, or rather, it feels like it’s missing some vital point. I don’t know what to do about this strange feeling."

"Master likes to worry. It’s like you’re a worry enthusiast. Isn’t it completely normal for Master to get dragged into unreasonable trouble? There’s no point in worrying about such a basic thing."

"If you keep telling yourself that everything was inevitable, you won’t be able to move forward... I can’t be that optimistic."

"You’re really paranoid. Master, are you okay? You know, there’s an old saying that goes 'to trust a person is to profit.'"

"That’s a way of remembering kanji."

Good grief. I stretched my body.

"Oh. Oh, yeah, I need to call Kasugai-san... I wonder if that person has a cell phone."

Even if she does, I don’t know the number. Then let’s contact Miiko-san... that person doesn’t have a cell phone either, but she’ll be home at this hour....

I see... right.

Well, I guess I should resolve myself.

Now that we’re in this situation, it can’t be helped.

It’s a bit stressful to be under the same roof as a professional killer, but I’m sure Izumu-kun won’t appear on the *front* anymore. When we first met, he said something about having to use an extraordinary amount of energy to get to the *front*. I don’t know if that’s the truth or a lie, but still, if you have to constantly balance your mind, then I guess your body will end up imbalanced. Like the "fainting habit" of Rizumu-chan and the "one hour a day" of Izumu-kun.

You get what you pay for.

That’s also called the pros and cons.

However... the problem isn't just with Izumu-kun (and Rizumu-chan). Even Kuchiha-chan (and Assistant Professor Kigamine) are problematic to the extent that I don't know how to describe it.

".....Um. Hime-chan."

"Yes, yes?"

"I want to borrow the knowledge of *Shiogi-chan, the dictionary*." I raised my body and faced Hime-chan with a serious tone. "First, is it possible to create an immortal person?"

"Hmm... okay. However, there weren't many occasions where Hagihara-san spoke seriously about immortality... she said things like immortality is a romanticism that will never come true, or that it's opportunism as an escape from reality."

"Hmm...."

I don't really understand.

Shiogi-chan was unexpectedly a poet?

"But Hagihara-san continued after that, saying, 'As a theoretical methodology, it's not an impossible subject.' So don't consider this a serious story, think of it as one told on the night of a school trip, after you turned off the lights and got into the futon."

".....So there was a school trip. Even though you were in different grades...."

"To be precise, it was a training camp. Well, to put it simply, *immortality* in the material sense is the metabolism. It's the regenerative ability that accompanies it. In addition, the immune system has the ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment around us. If these are perfect, human beings basically don't age. Or rather, they can maintain their *state of health*. Because they don't age, they don't die. In other words, they're immortal."

"I see."

This scene was like something out of a science fiction novel.

Cell copy integrity... genetic perfection.

If you're invulnerable, then you're also immortal.

"But what about brain cells? When brain cells reach a certain amount, they stop multiplying and they have no regenerative ability... I've heard something like that."

"If you retort with such idle gossip it's a bit troublesome... Well, it's like a floppy disk. If you keep forgetting all the non-critical stuff, and if you don't remember anything but the important stuff, then isn't it fine to a certain extent?"

"To record... no, **to not remember**. But... then it doesn't make much sense to be immortal."

"There's a reverse methodology. If you're going to die, just record your personality on some organic media and transfer it to another new, healthy body... or something like that. You could say it's like a brain transplant."

"Only Dr. Black Jack could do that kind of surgery... Well, in that case, if you were made into a half-cyborg, you could be immortal. Program the personality onto something like a DVD disc, copy it, and then put it into a mechanical body....."

I'm starting to feel like an idiot.

What kind of topic is this?

If that was possible, there'd be no hardship.

Even if it's utter pseudoscience at best.

Disregarding reality and practicality.

Theory that's not accompanied by practicality.

It's just like... ESP.

Just like fatalism.

Just like magic.

"So the solution to get as close to *immortality* as possible is to have a high metabolic rate and an innate ability to regenerate cells that is *superior to that of an ordinary person*. The theory behind what I just said is that replacing the parts that can no longer be used is fundamentally a hypothetical model of that nature, but in the end, such a thing would cost an astronomical amount

of money." Hmm, I took a breath. "So I guess immortality like that of a vampire is impossible... With such a realistic *immortality*, surviving a shot to the back of the head is impossible."

".....Hime-chan isn't really interested, but," Hime-chan said as a preface. "How does Assistant Professor Kigamine approach that area?"

"So far, I don't know... No more than what was already explained. And it doesn't really seem like she intends to inform us."

"Eh?"

"That's certainly the right decision... Well, I'll tell Hime-chan. Kuchiha-chan, I heard that she has a *deathless body*."

"Huh?" As expected, Hime-chan responded in the same way that I did when I heard it. "What kind of metaphor is that?"

"Who knows... That's what the person in question said."

"The person in question...? That sounds like a lie."

"Well... whether it's a lie or the truth, it sounded like a lie anyway. Not trusting self-referential remarks, no matter who you're dealing with, is one of the most basic of basics. It's an absurd thing to say... At this point, it feels like Kasugai-san's decision to leave quickly was the correct one."

"Was it? Even so, Hime-chan is having fun," Hime-chan said with a smile. "Going out and staying with Master somehow makes the inside of your chest get excited, doesn't it?"

"Oh... Come to think of it, I've never been on an overnight trip with Hime-chan before."

"That's right."

"Is it?"

It's not such a simple thing, is it?

She looked like she didn't have any worries at all.

"Then let's go on a proper trip sometime. Not to some weird place, but to a hot spring inn."

I decided to put aside the topic of Kuchiha-chan and went with Hime-chan's topic. Trying to force the worries you're harboring on another person

for the sake of halving them is, after all, nothing more than a shared illusion based on ego. It didn't seem like Izumu-kun took Kuchiha-chan's words to heart at all. In the first place, what's the most important thing for people? It's the ability to leave aside the things you don't understand without trying to understand them. In short, that's how it is.

"Hime-chan, where do you want to go?"

"Huh? That's no good. Master, you have a girlfriend, right? If that's the case, then no matter how much Hime-chan wants it, you shouldn't do that. If that is the case, then sleeping in the same room as Hime-chan is no good."

"Huh? I don't have a girlfriend...You're not talking about Kasugai-san, are you? If so, then I'll crush your spirit with my refutations."

"That's not it. Geez, you can't hide it from me. Mii-nee-san told Hime-chan all about it. That Master has a blue haired lover."

"....."

Eh, no way.

Miiko-san, is that how you saw me?

"Hold on... that's a misunderstanding," I said, approaching Hime-chan reflexively. "What... what did you hear? Did Miiko-san say that?"

"Yes... What's with that serious face that I've never seen before? It looks like the face of a demon who got hit by a peashooter."

"It means the attack was too effective...."

I couldn't put power into my voice.

"What the hell...."

Seriously, what the hell?

With an impression like that, what hope is there?

Come to think of it, Kasugai-san also said that it was hopeless or something like that... In that case, did she know about that cold-hearted thing? Did she know and laugh?

".....Is it a misunderstanding?"

"That's right... she's just a friend. Didn't I tell you about it at some point? The girl who's a bit similar to Hime-chan... ah... uwa----"

I wavered.

It's like all of my blood suddenly flowed into my heart.

A scrambled egg.

What surprised me was how surprised I was at the sudden feeling of depression. It's been a long time since I've been shocked at being misunderstood by another person. Uwa, the *deathless body* and the *Cannibal* and the punctured tires, all of these things that had been monopolizing the priority of my thoughts suddenly became irrelevant to me at an incredible speed.

".....Master became depressed at mach speed...." Hime-chan drew attention to my poor state. ".....Mii-nee-san's misunderstanding, is it that bad?"

"Hmm....."

"Master, do you like Mii-nee-san?"

"Hmm....."

Getting asked that up front was troubling.

Well, I don't hate her. Right now, it's because of that person's help that I can live honestly in Japan. After forcefully dropping out halfway through the ER3 system and coming back to this country, if I hadn't met Miiko-san and Suzunashi-san in Kyoto, I would've only been able to survive by being taken in by the Kunagisa Syndicate.

But about whether I like or dislike another person.

It's a topic so laughable that I can't laugh.

It's just nonsense.

"Miiko-san is... I owe Miiko-san a debt of gratitude. She's a good person. And she's one of the few I know who has common sense."

"But, Mii-onee-san sometimes walks around with a sword. A serious sword that's not a fake. I can't say that she's a person with common sense."

"Yeah... that's right. I guess so."

"You're iffy." Hime-chan said with a kind of pout that would make my tea muddy. "You're indecisive. If you like it, then shouldn't you just say it?"

"....."

She's young.

I don't envy her.

I think it's miserable.

"People's feelings can be anything... like or dislike, love or hate, I don't think it's a matter of that. It's already out of the question. What are people's feelings but the accumulation and passing of misunderstandings?"

".....You can keep being cynical and pretending to be a nihilist, Master," Hime-chan said with a sigh, looking down on me. Somehow, it looked like a composed expression. "Master undoubtedly likes Mii-nee-san."

"....."

This time it wasn't a question.

For a moment, the answer was blocked.

Even after a moment, it remained stuck.

Not because... it was too abrupt.

Or because what she said was off the mark.

.....If that's the case, then what is it?

Why can't I answer?

It's right, but. It's wrong, but.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

It's fine as long as I answer.

"What... are you saying?" I finally answered Hime-chan. I shouldn't be... shaking. "You keep saying crazy things. Calm down and think about it, it's not like that. Come on, who do you think I am?"

"Surprisingly, it's something you don't know yourself."

In contrast, Hime-chan still looked composed. Composed, but also a little cold.

"It's something you don't realize until other people tell you. You don't know who you like by yourself. Even Hime-chan, until Nanami-san told me of the feelings I held... I didn't notice them at all."

"Such... feelings?"

"The feeling of being in love with someone." Hime-chan chuckled and answered quietly. "Yes. Nanami-san told me to hate him immediately. But that's not logical. You can't fall in love with someone based on logic, and once you like them, you can't easily hate them. I think that it's exactly what as Master said... you can't control your own feelings, you have no control over them."

"Hmm... so there's a person Hime-chan likes."

I was a bit surprised. Although there was no particular basis for it, I always thought that Hime-chan was disconnected from such things. Even if you put aside the past, I didn't think she was suited for that kind of thing, just because of her personality.

"Yes. There is."

With plenty of confidence and a little joy, Hime-chan nodded. When I heard that, it didn't feel too bad. She may have an eccentric side, but Hime-chan also has a cute side.

This girl.

It's not too late.

"Is that so. Then I guess you're also on very good terms with that person," I said, deliberately teasing her. "Since Hime-chan is in love with him, then he's surely cool, smart, manly, kind, and considerate. A man with no faults."

"No." Hime-chan slowly shook her head. "He's an uncool, dumb, and effeminate person who's not kind at all and has not a shred of compassion. He's the kind of person you can't handle."

"But even then, he treasures Hime-chan."

"That person would only see Hime-chan as a stone on the side of the road."

".....What's so great about someone like that?"

If I were to give my honest opinion as a member of the same sex, I'd say that this guy's nature is one step short of the lowest. I've seen most of the people at the bottom, but I've never heard of a man who's that bad. It's annoying to agree with her, but I understood Nanananami's words.

I don’t understand people.

I don’t understand a woman’s heart.

Even more so that of a young girl.

And if it’s a bishoujo, it’s impossible to understand.

"That person is so insensitive that I’m sure he’ll never notice that Hime-chan likes him for the rest of his life."

"Aren’t you going to confess?"

"I can see the result. Hime-chan will never think of telling her feelings for the rest of her life."

"The rest of your life?"

"The rest of my life. No matter what, I absolutely won’t waver. I don’t want to ruin my current **barely** existing relationship with that person."

"Hmm... that’s kind of painful."

"Yes. It’s painful." Hime-chan nodded. "But it’s not that bad, it’s a pain that’s strangely comforting. In the past, I used to never think about this kind of thing...."

The past.

The present.

The difference between now... and then.

I guess Hime-chan is changing.

Unlike me.

Step by step, one step at a time, slowly and steadily.

"....."

I’m not jealous.

I only have high hopes.

Rather, I want Hime-chan to achieve it.

What I couldn’t do.

What I can’t do.

"Hmm." Hime-chan tilted her head. "I’ve been talking a bit too much, haven’t I?"

".....Yeah."

"Master, you're very sensitive like that. It's like you don't like interference in any way, whether it's you doing it or having it done to you. That's why you're attracted to Mii-nee-san who's very good at keeping her distance, isn't it?"

"Hmm... if you say it like that, maybe." The context is different, but it's the same feeling like when I was together with Tomoe-chan some time ago. "Anyway, Miiko-san is a person who's skilled at keeping a good distance. Maybe it's because she does kendo."

"I think that's irrelevant."

Hime-chan laughed.

"I want to go to Kyushu."

"Eh?"

"So, Kyushu. The travel destination. Yeah. Master, if you really don't have a girlfriend, then it's ethically fine."

"Oh... yeah."

Did the conversation return all the way back to that point?

Because it was so abrupt, I was confused.

"But Kyushu is big. Where?"

"Hakata. Um... Yuma-san's hometown."

"....."

Zigzag.

Shisei Yuma.

I was at a loss for words for a moment, but.....

".....I understand. Let's go once I get paid for this part-time job."

And normally, very normally, I nodded.

To the extent that it wasn't unnatural, I should have nodded.

"Thank you."

Hime-chan said.

She was smiling.

At least it looked like a smile.

I looked at that smiling face and didn't smile back.

I don’t know how to laugh.

I can’t remember anymore.

Somehow, the two of us came to stare at each other.

Awkward.

It's weird.

Being awkward with Hime-chan……

Until now, such a thing was rare---

When.

"Ikki."

There was a knock from the opposite side of the room’s door. Shortly after, the door opened and the figure that appeared from the other side was Kuchiha-san. She was wearing oddly fancy cat-like pajamas (are retorts banned?). Her hair gave the impression that she had just finished taking a bath.

Kuchiha-chan spoke over the threshold.

"The shower’s open."

"Eh… what about Assistant Professor Kigamine?"

"She already finished. Since she’s a night person… I wonder if she’ll work after this. But really, she must think I’m a maid or something… She wanted me to do the shower report myself. Anyway, it’s your turn to shower. Or are you the sort of man that’s fine with it for a day?"

"Ah, no… not particularly…"

It was somewhat difficult.

Since that conversation in the courtyard, we’ve seen each other at dinner, but this was the first time we’ve had a proper conversation. I’m grateful to her for breaking up the awkwardness with Hime-chan at the right time, but I can’t say that I’m comfortable with Kuchiha-chan either.

"……..?" Trying to understand Kuchiha-chan is pointless, but her expression was strange. "Well then… since you’re last, you can use it as long as you want. The room is on the first floor… Do you understand?"

"Ah, yeah."

"Sorry, but I don't have any men's clothes for you to change into... It seems like you'd fit by the looks of it, but I don't feel comfortable lending you my shirt. Though, you seem shameless, so you can sleep as you are."

"That's fine."

But don't just casually say that I'm shameless.

"Thank you for the trouble, Kuchiha-chan."

"No, no. Well then."

With a small wave of her hand, Kuchiha-chan closed the door.

Somehow.....

She acted like the conversation in the courtyard never happened.

It's relieving, it's relieving, but... all in all, I don't get this girl.

I turned towards Hime-chan.

Hime-chan was looking at me.

A bit of that awkwardness returned.

".....Well, I'll go wash away my sweat."

"Yes. Can I go to bed first?"

"Yeah. By all means, don't hesitate."

Hime-chan replied awkwardly.

Although it seemed to be as usual.

Although it looked like the usual smile, it wasn't.

Very awkward.

It seemed fleeting.

".....Ah."

Suddenly.

Her eyes looked terribly lonely.

I want that expression to stop.

You're not like me.

It's not too late, you should be able to do your best.

Up to now, you've just had problems with your surroundings... You've not been suffering from a problem that was fundamentally your own like me.

That's why.

I wanted to say something to her.

Really....

Really, only for this girl....

I want to do something.

".....Hey, Hime-chan."

".....Yes?"

"I really like you, Hime-chan."

"....."

"No, you might not think it's persuasive because of my usual habit of saying nasty things, but I'm serious. To be honest, there are some things about Hime-chan that I don't like, but even without Aikawa-san, you have a lot of good qualities. You've helped me a lot in the past, and this time was no different. You've followed me up to this point. Even a defective product like me thinks so, so I'm sure that person that Hime-chan likes will understand your feeling one day. So don't say that you're going to give up before you do it."

".....Right."

Hime-chan looked down.

Her eyes were no longer lonely.

But.

Somewhere, her eyes were sad.

"Hime-chan too... I also like Master. I really, really like Master."

"Yeah, thanks."

".....Well then, good night."

Hime-chan got into the futon.

I left into the hallway.

2

After dinner, since I had a part-time job next week, I asked Assistant Professor Kigamine to give me a quick tour of the building, but since it was originally a clinic that had been remodeled, it looked very different from specialized research facilities, such as the research facility of Shadou Kyouichirou last month. There were at the very least such things as chemicals and equipment, but it felt more like an archive.

Conference room, briefing room, library, WA room. Measuring machine room, laboratory, experiment preparation room, waiting room (the first room that I was guided to), professor's room, assistant professor's room, assistant's room, seminar room (this area was only that in name, it's state was mostly that of a storage room). There was a kitchenette, a bathroom, a changing room next to it, and a shower room in the back. And apparently Kuchiha-chan's room was at the dead end of the first floor (I wasn't shown there, of course). The second floor seemed to be a space for guests like us to stay (formerly two hospital rooms). At this point, I wasn't shown the inside of each room in detail, so I can't say much about them, but it seemed to me that there's not much point in locating so far away from the university. Assistant Professor Kigamine's secondary residence is what it'd be called (incidentally, the primary residence seemed to be an apartment near Shijo Karasuma)... or should it be called Kuchiha-chan's secluded residence?

No... originally, it was a clinic.

That might be more important than I thought. If there is the *experimental body* called Kuchiha-chan, then it would be the domain of human medicine rather than research... Indeed, it's a subject that would make that perverted dissection enthusiast somewhere cry from joy if she heard about it.

"Which reminds me, what is Kokoromi-sensei doing now....." If there's a chance, I'll ask Kunagisa to investigate next time. "Okay."

After finishing the shower, I wiped my wet body with a towel. I put back on the clothes I took off in the changing room. My hair was just cut by Hime-chan, so it will dry quickly with a hair dryer.

"....."

Hime-chan.

Why did she say that sort of thing?

Why did she ask me that sort of thing?

If I'm asked something, I'll end up thinking about it.

Thinking.

If I get an answer, what will I do....

".....It's nonsense."

Right, nonsense.

It's ridiculous to love someone.

It should be ridiculous.

I've never liked or disliked anyone in my life. I've never loved anyone. I've never hated anyone. I feel nothing for anyone. I don't have anything to do with anyone.

Think that.

Yes, realize that.

I don't care if it's an illusion, just be aware of it.

".....Let's go to bed."

I put the towel I wiped my hair with in the basket and stretched once.

When I got out of the changing room,

"Ah." "Oh."

In the hallway was Assistant Professor Kigamine.

She wasn't in sleeping clothes and her figure was full of energy. It seemed like she'd continue to work after this. Well, this person's appearance in sleep wear is unimaginable. Even the sight of her asleep isn't within the scope of my imagination.

".....How do you do?"

"Good. I had predicted beforehand that I would meet you here."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said.

Again, weren't you surprised just a moment ago?

"Oh? Did you cut your hair?"

"……Eh?"

You didn't notice that?

"And what happened to your cheek?"

"……No, nothing really."

This person……

Really doesn't care about others.

"At any rate, it's a disaster. The tires."

"No, I guess we're in the same boat."

"Let's get some spare tires first thing tomorrow and carry out repairs. You'll have to help me out……"

"Well, it's also my problem. I have some experience, so you can count on me. It's also within the earnings of the part-time job."

"Are you going to bed already?"

"Yeah… I'm not really tired, but my partner was doing her best and is now in fatigue mode. I can't just stay up."

"Is that so… Yukariki-san, right?"

"Yes."

"She's an idiot."

I was told bluntly.

She said it as sharply as a master cutting down his opponent.

…..She probably couldn't tell anyone until now and has been holding back from saying it.

"Right… There's also people like that in this world… I had lost my awareness for just a moment…."

"Hmm…."

Well, Assistant Professor Kigamine is a faculty member at a national university and a scholar. I guess she must not have had a close relationship

with an Idiot-chan in her life who couldn't study. Perhaps she's seeing one for the first time.

A gap.

"But Hime-chan is a good girl."

"I'll admit that she's good... but good in what kind of sense? By the way," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "Would you mind talking with me for a bit?"

"Huh... okay, but about what?"

"Did you hear anything from Kuchiha?"

Ah.

I was suddenly cut in a very deep place. Well then, how do I answer... In this case, unlike with the previous question, the mood was different so it would be a bad move to lie. After a moment's hesitation, I decided to answer honestly.

"About her *deathless body* and that I'm similar to Kuchiha-chan and Assistant Professor Kigamine's former mentor... I think."

".....I see. Then this will be quick."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said, lowering her voice.

"Then I want you to continue to stay close to her and watch her. Do you understand?"

".....But Kuchiha-chan is aware of everything."

"I have no intention of hiding it. I'm sure she'll find out after talking with you for a bit anyway... After all, Kuchiha has always completely seen through my schemes."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. That has been completely predicted in advance." Assistant Professor Kigamine continued in a cool, emotionless tone, at least as far as I could observe. "Still... to be honest, I'm at a loss. You could say that the future is a bit dark... That's why I hope that your presence can serve as a catalyst for me... for us."

"*Not dying*....." I said while thinking that this was not the kind of thing to talk about in the middle of a hallway. "What exactly does that mean?"

"I can imagine the gist of what she said... If you ask me, it's just **as it is**, it's exactly **as it is**. To not die. To not die. Too noot diie. The body is always kept at optimal health. In every sense of the word, it doesn't age."

"Doesn't age...."

"She looks roughly 18 years old on the outside... but she's lived at least three times that age."

"Three times!?" Eighteen times three is... "54 year old... that's ridiculous... 54?"

"At minimum. From an arithmetic point of view, it would be wise to think that she has lived three times more than that."

Three times that...

162 years old.

What... is that.

It's too ridiculous to deny or shake off.

"Three times... why is it three times? What's the basis for that first 'minimum' line?"

"She seems to be able to remember only **about that far back**... If we follow the theory that brain cells are ROM rather than RAM, it means that you can't waste brain cells... You could say that's the root of her peculiar, lazy personality. Fufufu, at this point, there's already an impossibility in that hypothesis, isn't there? Incidentally, the one who was *in charge* of her before me, my mentor, said she was roughly 800 years old."

"Eight hundred... isn't that Yao Bikuni[2]?"

"Do you think it's possible?"

"Eh?"

[2] In japanese legends, a human who ate mermaid flesh is called Yao Bikuni and is said to be able to live up to 800 years.

"What do you think? In all, a person who's lived for nearly ten centuries... Do you think such a person can exist?"

"Hmm. I think it's impossible, but...."

I know it's impossible, but....

I told Assistant Professor Kigamine what I told Hime-chan a short while ago. Cells with perfect regenerative and reproductive capabilities. A metabolism that repeats itself forever. Of course, not forgetting to mention that these are *the thoughts of a layman.* However, Assistant Professor Kigamine just shrugged saying, "You say some interesting things."

"But the very premise of *a cell with perfect regenerative and replicative capabilities* is a contradiction in itself. In the first place, *death* itself is programmed within the genes of our cells."

"....."

"In the cellular sense, it's apoptosis... No matter whatever state of health you maintain, extending your lifespan only increases the chance of activating the cancer factors that are fundamentally incorporated within genes. It's not a simple copy error of a cell, each cell dies naturally according to its role. That's what is meant by *if you're alive, you will surely die*. Death is already part of the prerequisites of life."

"....."

Romanticism that will never come true, or opportunism as an escape from reality. Is this what the two sentences prefaced by Shiogi-chan as "idle gossip" mean? An absolute contradiction that blindly ignores theory.

"In the end, it's a paradox in terms of which comes first, growth or evolution... a paradox, huh. Fufu." At the word *paradox,* Assistant Professor Kigamine just laughed. "But between the strongest spear and the strongest shield, the spear would obviously win."

"How?"

"Shields are tools to parry spears, but a spear is a tool to pierce a person. They're not tools made to penetrate shields... *resisting*[3] really is an accurate expression. But you know what? Even if it's an exaggeration to say that apoptosis is programmed into each cell, *death* is only a step to the next *life*. It is just a step... then isn't *not dying* synonymous with *not living*?"

"....."

"Paradoxically, if such a legendary existence that was immortal in the strictest sense actually existed, it would be troublesome. In the first place, if cells were immortal, then people wouldn't be able to finish growing. The program would keep repeating and repeating and multiply to infinity for all eternity. That's just a cancer cell. That individual will just keep growing infinitely larger and larger... a giant like a black hole would be created... No, it will be the birth of a giant that will be **forever incomplete**. After all, the cells will never perish either automatically or passively, unless you have the ability to freely and arbitrarily control the life and death of a cell, but that is God's domain."

"Well, I agree...."

Growth and evolution.

A paradox.

"Furthermore, there is also the question of where to get enough energy to guarantee such growth... Energy, in the grand scheme of things, is synonymous with life."

"....It is."

Somehow... I was at a loss for words.

If Assistant Professor Kigamine, who is supposed to be studying immortality, who should be studying Kuchiha-chan, has fatally denied the very thing itself, I don't know what position to take. At the moment, I didn't have a firm foothold.

---

[3] Resisting is pronounced tatetsuku which phonetically means "shield piercing."

As usual, Assistant Professor Kigamine didn't seem to be bothered by my confusion and continued her monologue without paying any attention to me as if she was talking to herself. "But you know," she said. ".....Fufu, you might think it's humorous to see a biologist say such childish things, but I think these things are fundamental. Yes, when thinking about the most basic and binary principles... what exactly is *death*?"

".....*Death* is...."

Not living.

Not being able to meet anyone.

Not being able to talk with anyone.

Not being able to feel anything.

Not being able to think about anything.

Generally speaking.

"I guess it must be nothing."

"....."

I remembered the question Kuchiha-chan asked me.

What does it mean to *not die*?

She had a hard time with my vague answer, and then she answered herself saying, "not dying means never changing."

Then what is *death*?

"*Death* means nothingness forever and ever and ever. To put it strongly, it's darkness... isn't it? It's to be alone in the darkness with no prospects, without any news, and nothing to rely on."

"You're a poet."

"I'm just a user of nonsense."

"I appreciate your poetic sensibility, but... I think it's a bit more dull... Let's see, for example, the popular image that if a person's heart stops beating, they die. But since the heart is an involuntary muscle, it has nothing to do with the human will, to be precise."

"It's Kosakai Fuboku."

"What's that?"

Assistant Professor Kigamine responded with a question.

Apparently, she didn't know.

"There's a novel like that. It's a mystery novel...."

"You read strange books."

She looked at me with doubting eyes.

Well, that's true.

"There's a long-established theory that your spirit dwells within the heart, did you know that? Since ancient times, people thought that humans think with their hearts. That was before the existence of the brain was discovered...."

"That wouldn't necessarily be a mistake. It's the heart that pumps blood to the brain and the brain doesn't move the heart."

It's the heart that's pounding.

It's also the heart that grows cold.

It's also the heart that is being tested.

"Yes... and **even the movement of the heart has nothing to do with *death***. *Death*, the distinguisher known as *death* isn't caused by an abnormality in the brain or the five internal organs... **rather, it's normal**. **If you live normally, you'll die normally**. Because otherwise, you can't live. Then what is her existence?"

If it's not normal, it's abnormal.

If it's not regular, it's irregular

"**She knows herself**... that's what I think," I said. "**That's why you called me**."

"Exactly."

"But if you can allow me to express my selfish stance, I don't think you can understand yourself on your own. It feels like Kuchiha-chan doesn't know anything either."

"Yeah... sure, maybe. However," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "At the very least it seems that Professor Saitou... managed to grasp *something* about her."

"Saitou...."

Their former mentor who I'm said to resemble.

According to them, I'm just like him.

"....A rebellion against causality. A revolution against the existent destiny. A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come, "Assistant Professor continued as she chanted. "Those are... in the first place, that person's, Professor Saitou's words. At the time, when I received his instruction, I was an ordinary senior high school student... Yes, I was about the age of Yukariki-san."

"Oh, a senior high school student?"

"I took over his research... **I continued to follow after him, but**... Honestly, it's a heavy burden to bear. Kuchiha doesn't open to me at all... This isn't the first time I used this kind of **calculating approach** of bringing someone like you in."

"....."

"But that's failed every single time."

"...Kuchiha-chan said that there was a shortage of human resources."

"Yes... from Kuchiha's point of view, my plots, or rather, my existence must certainly be humorous. But, however, this time, this time... I might succeed."

"Why?"

"Until now, Kuchiha has completely ignored my plans when she realized what I was up to." Assistant Professor Kigamine's words were self-deprecating. "This time, there is a sliver of hope."

"A sliver... is it?"

"Yes... I've been continuing after the professor for a long time, but... I'm getting pretty tired. This is the first time Kuchiha has participated knowing that there was a plan, knowing that there would be obstacles. It looks like the aptitude test worked too. That is to say, there was meaning in holding it here."

"....."

The first time?

Kuchiha-chan herself said it like that.

The interests are aligned, she said.

At the very least, based on Assistant Professor Kigamine's side of the story, Kuchiha-chan isn't cooperating with the research at all. In fact, even this time, I can't really tell how many falsehoods or calculations were included in what she said. But still, this is a very strange case.

"I... Kigamine Yaku, want to pursue every hope by any means necessary... for the sake of defeating fate."

"For the sake of... carving out my own destiny."

Carving out your destiny.

Destroying causality.

Collapsing... the Story.

".....It's my job, so I'll obey if ordered," I said. "I'm not very good at deceiving serious people with a purpose."

"There's no need to deceive me."

".....Is that so.... It seems that the conversation is over, so can I go already?"

"Huh?"

"I think I understand why Kasugai-san was so rude to you and ran away from here. If anything... it might be *because of Kuchiha-chan*."

"....What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Even if there is a meaning, there's no guarantee that the meaning will have any meaning. Once you get to the meaning of the meaning of the meaning of the meaning, it's no longer a matter of human knowledge."

".....If you think it's inhumane to use Kuchiha as an *experimental subject*, then you're off the mark," Assistant Professor Kigamine calmly said. "Her

possession of a *deathless body* makes her socially vulnerable. I don't know what would happen if people were to find out. Somebody... must protect her."

Strong is weak, weak is strong.

A *deathless body*.

Having people be cautious of you, being regarded as dangerous.

And probably.....

Being killed.

Being slaughtered in every way.

"She doesn't have the ability to protect herself."

I don't affect anyone.

I needed a place to live and someone to take care of me.

A deathless body.

Death.

The strength of a person who can commit suicide.

".....I don't think it's inhumane. I mean, it's a little late for that, considering my life... but maybe...."

"Maybe?"

"No, that's an exaggeration."

That's it.

This is talking too much.

I don't have that right.

Because... I'm not concerned.

"Good night, Assistant Professor Kigamine."

"....Yeah. See you tomorrow."

Assistant Professor Kigamine walked down the hallway without saying anything more to me. Is it the laboratory or the library in that direction? Anyway, she's probably going to do research work all night. Kuchiha-chan said she was a night person, but on the contrary, it looked like she worked all day long. From the point of view of a lazy person such as myself, it was something I really admired.

It's something admirable.

But... maybe Kasugai-san didn't evaluate Assistant Professor Kigamine that way.

The research she was doing while working at the Shadou Kyouichirou research facility, which had been completely destroyed by Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke last month, was incredibly significant, but not something to be praised.

However.

If I had asked her at the time, "Why would you do that?" She would have replied.

"Because it's work."

In accordance with that....

Assistant Professor Kigamine isn't someone to look up to.

That person isn't working.

That person is on a mission.

But that probably wasn't what disturbed Kasugai-san. Kasugai-san doesn't have the temperament to be distrubed by such things. That person... she doesn't feel anything for anyone, she's not dead because she's not alive, she's someone **from that side**.

But.

After being separated from Professor Kyouichirou....

There is no one to tell her what to do now.

There is no one to give her orders now.

In that sense, Kasugai-san is probably unstable at the moment. Her future actions are unpredictable. All together unpredictable.

Capricious.

A personality like a rolling dice.

Truly, she's just like me.

"....Akari-san, how are you doing...."

Turning my thoughts in a completely harmless direction, I decided to return to my room.

"Ah... laying in Akari-san's lap... That's right, when this part-time job is over, I'll go to that island again together with Tomo... I thought I'd never go there again."

I wish it didn't have that fortune teller.

I walked down the hallway for a while, touching my hair, which had dried up while I was talking with Assistant Professor Kigamine, and was about to climb up the stairs when Rizumu-chan came down from above. The stairs in this lab are so narrow that only one person can pass through at a time. I stopped and waited for Rizumu-chan to descend.

".....Hey Rizu..."

"....."

"Mu-chan?"

No.

Like Hime-chan, she was in a long t-shirt borrowed from Kuchiha-chan... Right now, both of her arms were out in the open. Long arms slenderly stretching out. Two legs extending from the hem of the shirt.

Not even a manteau.

Not even a straightjacket.

She had no expression.

It wasn't Rizumu-chan's innocent smile.

It wasn't even Izumu-kun's outrageous smile.

She had no expression.

She said nothing.

She who said nothing.

Who is she who said nothing, I didn't know.

He who said nothing.

Who is he who said nothing, I didn't know.

Which one?

Which is the *life* of this body?

Which is the *death* of this body?

I didn't know at all.

An inconsistency.

Which one of the two is inconsistent?

"Um... is it Izumu-kun?"

While I couldn't tell whether it was *he* or *she*, she went down the stairs and walked past me.

Soon after, the figure disappeared into the darkness.

That direction is... the waiting room? Or is it the front door? She didn't have the kind of atmosphere where it seemed like she decided to treat herself to a stroll in the middle of the night. So then where does she want to go? That direction is the opposite from the bathroom. Is she still half asleep? The look on her face was of one who was half asleep, and rather than ignoring me, it was like she didn't even notice me.

But I guess it wasn't that nuanced.

It was like she was sleepwalking.

What's that?... Does she also have a third personality?

No way, I've never heard of that.

Besides... it didn't seem like it was a dimension of her personality or anything like that, it was more like a complete transformation.

As if.

As if the personality had left.

Empty.

That's how she looked.

Empty, like well-lit darkness.

"....."

I considered chasing after her for a moment, but the thought of getting involved made my legs stop moving.

It's not like I didn't consider the worst case scenario.

That it was Izumu-kun's side and that he might be going to slaughter Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, his *targets*, right now. They're the only two people on the first floor....

....But.

Even if it is the worst case, it's something unrelated to me.

There's no reason to defend them.

If I get in the way, Izumu-kun will kill me without mercy. That's the duty of a *professional killer*. In accordance with his reason for being, he will kill me.

I don't want to get involved.

Besides, Izumu-kun promised me.

He wouldn't kill people in places connected to me.

If you think about it, that's an extraordinary deal. All I needed to do was keep company with a cute girl like Rizumu-chan. There are a heap of problems, but if it's just getting along, that mountain can be avoided. You don't have to climb a mountain just because there is one. So... that's the talent of leaving things you don't know as they are.

I climbed the stairs.

I went back to my room and opened the door. The lights were off. Looking at the bed, Hime-chan was asleep deep inside the futon. That's convenient. Even if Hime-chan is my partner, I don't want her to see my sleeping face. I'd still be able to sleep soundly, but somehow I'd feel different.

I got into my futon.

It's been a rough day... Oh, I forgot that I was going to contact Kasugai-san and Miiko-san. Well, it's too much of a bother now. I mean, that person will be fine and return to the apartment. Those who can live by themselves should live by themselves. Those who can't live by themselves will only get hurt if they live alone. But if you have to, that's just the way it is.

"Sleep."

I closed my eyes.

The next time I opened my eyes, I saw hell.

CHAPTER 7 — BATTLEFIELD (THOUSAND PAPER CRANE)

0

If you don't have bread, then starve to death.

1

Sometimes I wish I could go back in time.

That is to say, it would be a question like this.

"If you could redo your life, from where and from what point in time would you want to start over?"

The model answer is simple and clear.

I don't want to start over. I want to die soon.

My answer is the same.

Hypothetically, even if you could go back in time.

For example, even if time turned back to before I met that young blue boy, I would probably still repeat the same things I did after I had met that young blue boy. No matter how many times I start over, and no matter how many times I start over again, the exact same tragedy would endlessly repeat itself. Like a video recorded on media that will never degrade, following the same program as if it were sick.

Even if I went back to before my sister died.

Even if I went back to before I was born.

I would forever repeat the same thing over and over again.

As if it were dictated by the story of destiny.

As if submitting to someone's will.

The cause is different, but the result is the same.

But I think.

Even if it's called childish, even if it's called foolish.

Even if it's called nonsense, even if it's called a masterpiece.

I wish I could go back in time.

Before I had felt like this.

At that time, it was better than it was now.

There's not a single thing harsher than the future.

If there's a god governing fate, then I'll pray.

I'm asking you, please don't do a thing anymore.

Stay still where you are.

"....Ah, I had a strange dream. "

The sunlight shining through the gap in the curtains woke me up.

I had a strange dream, but I've already forgotten it. However, for once it's not my memory's fault; it's like that for most people. Even if you try to remember them, most dreams are forgotten.

.....

How do we know that?

Even though we should have forgotten them.

"Maybe, in fact, we only forget a little... I don't really know."

I also don't really understand this train of thought I'm having while I'm waking up.

Why am I even thinking about that?

I glanced over at the other bed.

It seems Hime-chan is still sleeping. Even though she should be taking supplementary classes right now, she's quite laid back. But it'll take some time to repair the Fiat, so I guess there's no helping it for this morning. Rather, the fact that she hasn't skipped a single lesson until now is something of a miracle.

Even with all that she says, I guess she must really love school.

I left the room, being careful not to make any noise and wake her up. If possible, I'd like to go wash my face in order to refresh myself, but... I guess the sink in the changing room is fine. The first thing that came to mind was the sink in the bathroom, but if I had to choose that thing, then I'd rather not choose at all.

I came down to the first floor and went straight to the changing room.

I was still a bit half asleep. My vision, or rather my thoughts were kind of hazy. I don't have low blood pressure, in fact, I'm quite good at waking up. I'm good, but... recently, because of Kasugai-san, I haven't been sleeping well lately. I should find a place where I can sleep alone soon... or maybe I'll just stay at Kunagisa's place for a week or so. If it's her, then I'm completely fine with having someone next to me when I sleep.

I knocked on the changing room's door, but there was no response, so I opened the door and went in. When I entered... everything was fine before I walked in, it was like walking down Hirao Street, but as I went in...

I had a strange intuition.

".....Hmm? "

Somehow.

I felt like I had to keep going and look at the shower room in the back. I wondered why I had this weird feeling. It was a strange intuition, but actually it wasn't strange at all. It wasn't something concrete, it was more of a vague, fragile certainty,

The air was wet[4].

The air was dry[5].

Intuition?

Or maybe, empiricism.

I'm not really sure.

I'm not really sure, but.....

Is it because I've just woken up?

I'm not really sure, but.....

I'm not really sure.

Or maybe, empiricism.

---

[4] Pronounced as wet, written as extinct.

[5] Pronounced as dry, written as blood loss.

Intuition?

The air was wet.

The air was dry.

"....."

There's no need to forcefully stop yourself from seeing what you want to see, what you want to see of your own free will. However, even with that understanding, I still decided to wash my face in order to make my head as clear as possible before finally opening the door to the shower room.

There, the girl who could not die was dead.

She was dead to the point where she couldn't be anything more than that.

She was dead to the point where you couldn't stand to look at her.

Her upper half and her lower half were cut through, and the guts that were packed inside were leaking out. Her organs must have lost oxygen a while ago, as they had turned into a reddish-black color. Living organs are very red, red and sparkling. The *things* coming out of Kuchiha-chan's upper body were, no matter how you look at it, completely lusterless and dead organs.

Loosely, loose enough that no sound would leak out to the changing room, water was flowing out of the shower... The smell of blood was faint. That must have washed away all the blood which should have spilled out onto the floor tiles.

The thing which had called me.

The faint sound of the shower and...

The slight smell of blood.

So that was it.

The wetness, the dryness.

Here it's....

Already over.

"Ah, ugh....."

I sealed my mouth.

I held back the scream that was about to leak out.

I immediately returned from my half-asleep state.

Reality?

A dream?

Which one... is this?

The body that appeared to have been ripped in half was... connected, but only slightly. By one vertebral column, and one layer of skin, it was connected.

Flashback.

The various corpses I've seen so far passed through my mind.

But even compared to them, this one was of an awful category.

Truly of an awful category.

It was as if the organs were...

It felt like the internal organs had been devoured.

The expression.

The expression on Kuchiha-chan's face.

The expression on Kuchiha-chan's face, the expression that I could see from here... I couldn't understand what it was. It wasn't distorted by pain, but... obviously, it wasn't calm either. If I had to say, it was blank.

It was blue and cold.

Her eyes were closed.

Both her arms and legs were spread out.

Her fists weren't clenched.

Her clothes were the same as from last night, those fancy cat pajamas.

The cat was completely black.

The cat.

The cat, the cat, the cat.

The blood had solidified and turned all black.

Black, black, black, black, black, black, black.

Black.

A black cat.

A cat-like black.

"Umm....." I asked the person who should be there. "What is this? This... these kinds of things are troublesome for me....."

I took one step back.

It was too sudden.

I took a second step back.

My comprehension couldn't keep up.

I took a third step back.

Calm down.

I took four steps back and left the shower room.

I closed the door.

I can't see anything.

Now I can't see anything.

I don't know anything.

".....!"

I rushed towards the sink and, with all the strength in my body, twisted the faucet. The water rushed out of the faucet with such force that it was almost overwhelming. I took some in my hands and washed my face. That's right, I came here to wash my face. I came here to wash my face. I came here to wash my face. Huh? Didn't I just wash it earlier? It's fine, it's not like it'll hurt to do it again. Wash wash wash wash wash. I love cleanliness. I love cleanliness. Keep it clean. Fastidiously clean.

Become calm.

Become cruel.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha....."

I'm suffocating.

It's hard to breath.

Did I drink the water?

No, I forgot to breathe.

Am I an idiot? I'm going to die.

"Ugh..."

Leaving the water running, I escaped out of the changing room and crouched down in the hallway.

I quickly realized and closed the door.

"Ughhh....."

How... did it get to this point?

What is this development?

Why is Kuchiha-chan dead?

Ah, that's right. Maybe it's a grand scheme to surprise me. Kuchiha-chan has a *body that cannot die*. She wouldn't die from having her organs pulled out. Surely, right now, she's going to open the door and say something like, "Surprise! Hahaha, I really scared you".

Her guts still sticking out.

With a blank expression on her face.

She'd appear.

".....Ah"

I remembered.

Last night, I saw Rizumu-chan... or was it Izumu-kun, I don't know which, but it was the undivided *Cannibal*.

The professional killer.

The one whose job is to kill.

I'm sure if I asked they would answer like this.

"Because it is work."

Work must be accomplished.

Accomplishing work isn't the important thing.

Work has to deliver results.

With an unsteady head, I forced myself to stand up.

With an unsteady body, I pushed myself up.

"Assistant Professor... Kigamine"

Is where?

Is she safe?

A night owl... She said she was going to work. So... the laboratory or the library, I think she walked in that direction. If my memory is correct. I hope that my memory is correct, but, if my memory is correct, my memory has never been correct even once.

Memory?

I want to forget all this as soon as possible.

I only remember things I don't like.

I only remember people I don't like.

I only know things I don't like.

I only know people I don't like.

"Not dead... not dead."

I walked down the hallway.

The first room was the laboratory.

I knocked. Knocking is important. After all, that's proper manners. It's rude if you don't follow manners. Rude and impolite. You'll get scolded. I don't want to get scolded. And if you knock, what a surprise, you'll clarify whether someone is inside or not. Knocking possesses all of these excellent advantages. There's no situation where it won't work.

But there was no response.

I twisted the knob.

It was locked.

There was no response and it was locked.

In other words, there's no one inside.

"....."

Does that mean there's no one alive?

Without taking time to think, I hit the door with my shoulder. With all my might and without any mercy for the door or for myself. Without a fragment of care.

After five times, the door creaked, tilted, and a gap opened. That's when I felt all the pain. I don't care. I'm always in pain. I always get hurt. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

Undoubtedly.

"....."

There was really no one inside.

That's obvious.

If there was someone inside, and that person was dead, and the room was locked, that would make it a locked room, wouldn't it? Realistically, that kind of thing is impossible. Impossible things can't happen.

Of course.

I touched my shoulder.

The bone was fine, it wasn't broken.

That's strange. How is it not broken?

Tilting my head, I advanced further into the hall.

The library.

I knocked. Knocking is important. After all, that's proper manners. It's rude if you don't follow manners. Rude and impolite. You'll get scolded. I don't want to get scolded. And if you knock, what a surprise, you'll clarify whether someone is inside or not. Knocking possesses all of these excellent advantages. There's no situation where it won't work.

But there was no response.

I twisted the knob.

It wasn't locked.

There, Assistant Professor Kigamine was dead.

She was sitting in a chair, her body slumped against a desk. Her eyes were facing towards me, but they were cloudy. Those were dead eyes. She wasn't alive. Certainly. There was nothing that could be done. With a hundred percent certainty.

She was dead.

Human necks don't bend at such an angle.

And one more thing.

Her right shoulder had been completely ripped off.

There were traces of her blood having gushed out.

It had already almost stopped flowing out.

It had already almost hardened.

Red-black and hardened.

Or... did it run out?

This smell.

I didn't notice it.

Why is that?

Was it because it was sealed?

The smell of blood.

The smell of death was sealed.

Now it was no longer sealed.

Death... has been released.

"....."

I tried to get closer, but I hesitated.

I felt like if I got any closer, I would be trapped.

It wasn't fear.

It wasn't shock.

This feeling... it's bad.

Right now, I was fascinated.

Death, death, death, death, death, death.

Madoka Kuchiha's corpse.

Kigamine Yaku's corpse.

I was fascinated by those two.

I was attracted to them. Attracted to them. Uncontrollably, without limit. An attraction with a force strong enough to draw together two massive

objects across an enormous distance was physically pulling me towards them.

This is... yearning.

I was yearning for it.

"Uh. Ughhh"

This time it wasn't one step at a time.

I moved four steps back at once and closed the door.

The smell disappeared.

A former clinic. I see, it has that kind of structure.

Completely sealed.

Death was once again completely sealed.

"How, how did it come to this point?"

If Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan are dead, then the part-time job won't happen, right? Even though it begins next week. Does that mean Miiko-san won't be able to get her hanging scroll? Isn't that the problem here? I understand that. That kind of thing, I understand.

Do you think I don't even understand that kind of thing?

I thought.

"I-Izumu-kun...."

That was the only thing I could think about now.

He did this.

A professional killer.

What a thing, that liar.

He told me he wouldn't kill anyone in front of me.

It's laughable, what a fool.

Did I believe in what a professional killer said?

Don't say, after all that, that you were betrayed.

Don't say that you believed him up until now.

Isn't that what you thought?

That tomorrow, those two could be dead.

That still, it doesn't involve you.

That's what you thought, right?

Why are you surprised with things going as you had predicted?

Rejoice, your predictions were right.

"**Shut up!**"

I ran down the hall.

I should have been running straight, but I ran into things left and right. I ran into the wall, I ran into the corners, I ran into door knobs here and there, and tripped where there was nothing.

It was pathetic.

"**Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up**... Be quiet! I'm normal!"

I arrived at the stairs.

I climbed.

There, taking my time.

One step at a time, one step at a time.

I climbed like I was chewing.

"**I didn't predict anything I didn't think anything I didn't feel anything I didn't think about anything I didn't rush anything I didn't regret anything I**"

I finished climbing the stairs.

Once more, I ran.

I stopped in front of the room where Rizumu-chan was sleeping.

This time, I didn't knock.

".....Izumu-kun!"

On the bed.

The Niounomiya siblings were dead.

"Huh?"

Snap, I heard a crack forming in my head.

Snap, snap, snap.

Crack.

I was already at my maximum limit.

My brain started to run away.

Has it already started?

That's no good, at this rate.

It's going to get away. I can't catch up.

"……Eeeh?"

Her body on the bed was…

Bloodstained.

Bloodstained.

Bloodstained.

As expected, the blood turned into a reddish-black color.

That's natural.

The neck was torn off.

At the neck, the head and the body were split into two.

Completely, without letting a single layer of skin connect them, it was complete.

A headless corpse.

Just that was enough, it was more than enough.

There was a large wound at the base of the chest, as if it had been drilled through.

The t-shirt borrowed from Kuchiha-chan was destroyed and, in the depths, in the place where the heart should have been, there was a big, big, big, big, deep, deep, deep, deep… wound.

More than a wound, it was a hole.

It went through.

Her head was cut off.

Her chest was pierced through.

She had been killed twice.

Well, that's right.

There were two personalities.

Twice.

You'd have to kill twice.

It doesn’t count as having died, right?

"I love you!"

And.

I remembered Rizumu-chan’s smile.

"Gyahahaha!"

And.

I remember Izumu-kun’s laugh.

Please stop.

I don’t want to remember that kind of thing.

Please stop please stop please stop.

"Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun.....?"

What’s the point of calling out to them?

I know there will be no answer.

No, I don’t know. How would I know?

I don’t want to understand, I don’t want to break.

Please respond.

You... you should be a feared professional killer, right?

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

They wouldn’t die from having their head cut off and their chest pierced.

You won’t die, right? There’s no way you can die.

Even if you try to surprise me, it’s not going to happen.

Because I’m used to having people die.

At this point.

At this point, that kind of thing won’t surprise me.

In the corner of the room, there was the manteau and the straightjacket, folded and left behind. Huh, straitjackets can be folded like that. That seems like quite a difficult structure to fold.

Really.

".....Hey, Rizumu-chan...."

No response.

".....Hey, Izumu-kun....."

No response.

Let's calm down.

I'm cool.

First, choose. Your actions from now on, choose them. Should I sort out this situation, or should I stay confused? The latter is clearly the easier choice. Choosing that would surely be the correct choice. But I chose the former. Certainly, I was confused.

Madoka Kuchiha was dead.

Assistant Professor Kigamine was dead.

The Niounomiya siblings were dead.

There's probably a connection there.

That's right, everyone is dead.

Everyone was killed.

A common point.

Like that, the chain of deaths connected.

".....**And.**"

I knew two things.

I understood Kuchiha-chan and Assistant Professor Kigamine.

They were the *professional killer*'s targets.

Targets are killed.

That's the rule.

That's common sense.

At minimum, it's courtesy.

*"***But... why is Izumu-kun....***"*

Or why is Rizumu-chan.

Dead.

I don't understand.

I don't need to understand.

".....I need to flee."

I have to wake up Hime-chan and flee.

The Fiat is no good, so I'll use the bicycle.

We don't need to go over the mountain.

Somewhere.

At least, somewhere that isn't here.

This place is... no good.

This place is already finished.

I removed the Niounomiya siblings from my field vision and left the room. I opened the door to the next hospital room. I didn't knock. I didn't have the time to think about that. What is knocking?

"Ichihime! Wake up!" I rushed over to the bed and shook Hime-chan who was still in her futon. "We're going to escape from here... things have become... a... mess"

I noticed something strange.

My hand that tried to shake her sank.

This isn't the elasticity of a human body.

".....!?"

I lifted up the futon.

Inside, there was a futon.

The futon was wearing a futon.

"....."

A futon.

No matter how you look at it, it's a futon. Without any subterfuge, a splendid futon. A person not calling that a futon would have a screw loose. If your head is normal, then your eyes are strange. If your eyes are fine, then your head is strange. Anyway, I think something is strange.

No.

But I'm strange.

I must be abnormal.

I don't possess any normality.

".....Huh?"

I tilted my head.
"Where’s Hime-chan?"

Where is Hime-chan?

2

Hime-chan was dead in the courtyard.

Both arms were... torn off at the elbow.

And the neck was twisted in an impossible direction.

She was dead in a pool of blood.

There was no smile there.

There was no hope there.

"....."

Pieces of meat.

The smell of blood. A pool of blood.

Where, where was this much blood in that small body?

Plenty.

Drifting about.

Her small body seemed to be floating in it.

Bones. Spinal fluid? Bones peeking out. Arms.

Where are the arms? The torn arms.

Chopped in pieces, soaked in blood, here and there.

Chunks of meat.

Slices of meat.

A twisted neck.

Eyes without life. Eyes without sparks.

Her pupils were open as if they had seen evil itself, but her eyes weren't twisted in fear nor frozen in grief, they were empty.

Her ribbon was untied.

The hair she was growing was disturbed.

Cruel, cruel, cruel.

Uniform.

Her still new uniform was torn everywhere.

It looked like she was attacked by a beast.

Like she was trampled over by a mythical beast.

Trampled over.

Conquered. Desecrated.

Sacrifice, prey, gluttony.

Disgrace. Destruction, destruction, destruction.

Murder. Assassination. Blood, meat, bone, blood, meat, meat.

Pieces of meat. The smell of blood. A puddle of blood. Where, where was this much blood in that small body? Plenty. Drifting about. Her small body seemed to be floating in it. Bones. Spinal fluid? Bones peeking out. Arms. Where are the arms? The torn arms. Chopped in pieces, soaked in blood, here and there. Chunks of meat. Slices of meat. A twisted neck. Eyes without life. Eyes without sparks. Her pupils were open as if they had seen evil itself, but her eyes weren't twisted in fear nor frozen in grief, they were empty. Her ribbon was untied. The hair she was growing was disturbed. Cruel, cruel, cruel. Uniform. Her still new uniform was torn everywhere. It looked like she was attacked by a beast. Like she was trampled over by a mythical beast. Trampled over. Conquered. Desecrated. Sacrifice, prey, gluttony. Disgrace. Destruction, destruction, destruction. Murder. Assassination. Blood, meat, bone, blood, meat, meat.

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Yukariki Ichihime.

Yukariki Ichihime's upbringing was ordinary.

Normal, and a little unusual.

It was a plain, ordinary story.

Unfortunately, this wasn't a story that can satisfy both bad taste and evil curiosity. This wasn't a story that could be told and listened to. Even if you strained your ears to listen, this wasn't a story that can be made clear.

The story itself was a common one.

There was nothing new, no surprising development.

It was moderately misfortunate.

It was moderately tragic.

It was moderately cruel.

But Yukariki Ichihime was not a moderate girl.

Therefore, it was very misfortunate.
Therefore, it was very tragic.
Therefore, it was very cruel.

Being saved by Aikawa Jun.
Receiving training from Shisei Yuma.
And yet, for her it was still misfortunate, tragic, and cruel.
It doesn't change.
Essentially, nothing changes.
The incident in June was caused by her own lack of moderation, after all. If she had been just a bit more moderate, such a tragedy wouldn't have happened. Yes, let's admit it. Let's admit it, let's admit it.
Yukariki Ichihime was by no means a victim.
You could even say she was the perpetrator.
Maybe she was of a different kind, peculiar, and grotesque.
Her bright smile was a deception.
Her bright words were hypocrisy.
Her bright posture was a disguise.
Her bright atmosphere was a fabrication.
Everything was artificial and hopelessly distorted.
Maybe she was of a different kind, peculiar, and grotesque.
Maybe she was the perpetrator.
"But... even then, what is this?"
Inside the pool of blood.
Drifting about as if eaten and scattered.
Losing both of her reliable arms.
Losing all thoughts and desires and wishes and prayers.
Hollow, empty eyes.

That expression.
That figure.

Is she not a victim?

I gazed upon it from afar.
I took my phone out of my pocket.
I pressed the buttons I remembered.
"Ah... It's me."
I said as the phone connected.
"People... are dead."
"And?"
A voice answered on the other side of the phone.
"People died."
"And?"
"Including me, there were five people... when I woke up this morning, four of them were dead."
"And?"
"Everyone is dead except me."
"And?"
"I want to escape, but I'm up in the mountains... All the cars were destroyed....."
"And?"
"Please help me."
"Understood. Wait there. Don't do anything at all. Don't contact the police or anywhere else. Leave it to boku-sama-chan."
"Okay... later."
I hung up the phone.
I also turned off the power.
Then, I walked up to Hime-chan, one step at a time.
Already... I don't remember anyone anymore.

Assistant Professor Kigamine, Kuchiha-chan.

The Niounomiya, Rizumu-chan, Izumu-kun.

All of it disappeared and flew away.

I erased everything.

I consumed it.

".....Sorry, Hime-chan."

I stepped into the pool of blood.

It was still not completely dry and it made a splashing sound. My shoes were dirty. Dirty? Do I want to say that they're dirty because they have human blood on them? It's blood. It's part of a human. Do I want to insult that?

It doesn't matter.

Gently, I held Hime-chan.

Preserving the scene, why would I care about that?

"Aaaaah....."

Hime-chan is dead.

Dead.

"I've always caused trouble for you... I feel bad for always involving you in all this... even now. It's true. It's true. It's true. It's not a lie."

I muttered to myself creepily.

This guy, what is he talking about?

But I didn't stop talking.

I couldn't control myself.

"For Hime-chan, it was only the beginning....."

"Master."

I remembered when Hime-chan said.

"When do you feel happy?"

".....?" I didn't get the point of the question and tilted my head like a fool. "Uh... sorry, but I don't really understand your question."

"Sooooo. At what times, in which moments do you feel happy to be alive?"

"I think that living together with three older maids in a four-tatami apartment would be happiness, but I've had no such experience."

"If you had you'd get the death penalty."

"Being executed seems a little overboard."

"It's a thought crime."

"Just that.....? But happiness, huh... I've never thought about that. I don't think I can have it, and I don't think I particularly want to have it."

"You don't think so?"

"I'm fine being that way. I just want to have a normal life, go to college, get along with the people around me, get a part-time job once in a while, go on vacations and so on. That's all I need. I don't need anything in particular. I don't want anything in particular."

"Hmm. You don't have something you want, something personal? Some people answered that they would be happy if there was world peace."

"I don't care about the world. Thinking about the world, can the world make me happy? That's completely laughable. Right now, I'm only thinking about the present. Isn't that fine? There's no need to worry about winning the lottery, or achieving great financial success, or fulfilling an old dream. If today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow I and the people around me can manage to continue living properly, then don't you think that's fine?"

"Hmm. Ah, I see"

Hime-chan smiled.

A charming smile.

"So that's what makes Master happy."

Happiness.

Apparently that's happiness.

What's that?

What does that mean?

What are you saying?

I don't have such a thing.

Even an ordinary one wouldn't suit me.

It's already been too late for me since long ago.

However, Hime-chan isn't me.

Unlike me, Hime-chan had a future. Finally, she had something ahead of her. Finally, she could see the things which had not yet come. After all this time, Hime-chan should have finally started to think that living wasn't just full of bad things.

At that point, was it too late?

At that point, was it no good?

Even if it was too late, was it no good?

For me, and for Hime-chan.

Are you saying that from the start, we had already failed?

She should have been happy now.

She said that she was happy.

Hime-chan said that every day was fun.

And yet.

Why couldn't she obtain even just that?

Is it something that outrageous?

Can an unfortunate person not be happy?

Just from being unfortunate you can't become happy?

It's not like she wanted to become more happy than other people.

Even half of that is fine.

Even ten percent of that is fine.

If only she wasn't unfortunate, it would have been fine.

It's not like she wanted something.

It's not like she wanted anything.

"Hime... chan"

Heavy.

Hime-chan's body was heavy.

Even though it should be light.

Hime-chan's body, which should have been as light as a feather, was far heavier than the Earth. Heavy, like a weight only able to destroy, like it was

meant to torture me. Cutting and cutting and cutting until the last moment until the last moment until the last moment. Tormenting. Choking. Strangling. Closing.

Creating a blockage.

I was about to get killed.

It's scary.

Really scary.

I looked up at the sky.

Blue.

The weather is great.

There's even a pleasant breeze blowing.

It goes well with a Japanese house.

A good place.

This is a good place.

Living in a place like this wouldn't be bad.

I guess Kuchiha-chan must have liked it too. She said something like that. That this place is a good environment. That's right. This is a very nice place for people to live in.

But... there's no one here.

Not anywhere.

There's only me here.

Nobody... nothing to do with me.

No sound, no light.

As if separated from the world, I was alone.

This place is dark.

It's dark.

Solitude in the dark.

Dark.

Darkness is dark.

Without any hope, with only despair.

I hate this. I don't like this place.

It’s like torture.

It’s the prison of destiny.

The guillotine of fate.

I don’t want to be in this place.

I don’t like being alone.

Please don’t leave me alone.

I’ve had enough.

Please leave me alone.

I don’t want to feel like this

These feelings, I didn’t want them.

For what purpose was I born?

With what meaning was I born?

At the very least... not to feel like this.

If it was to feel like this, then I would rather have not been born. If it was for this pathetic feeling, for the feeling like it would be far better to just die, I would rather not have been born. I wish I had been killed last month. I wish I had been killed two months ago. And before that, and before that, and before that, and before that, any time, any way, rather than experience this dark, inescapable sense of loss, I should have been killed as soon as possible somewhere and sometime before this. I wish I had never been there from the beginning.

I came to think that everything was wrong.

I came to think that living itself was wrong.

I came to think that everything was a failure.

I came to think that not being dead itself was a failure.

"Sorry... Hime-chan. Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry....." I muttered and muttered and muttered and muttered and muttered like a madman. "I am... even in this situation, someone who cannot cry it seems....."

There was no response from Hime-chan.

Even without a response, I continued.

I continued my futile nonsense.

".....In that case, I shouldn't have saved her that time. At that time, still....."
"Dying wouldn't have been scary."

You were scared, right?
Because you seemed to be having fun. When you were talking with Miiko-san, when you were playing with Moeta-kun and Hokou-chan, when that idiot Nanananami kept you company, when you joked with Koutoumaru-san, and you made friends at school, right? Right, you introduced them to me.
You had someone you liked, right?
Truly, you seemed to be having fun.

I wish I hadn't known that.

With a feeling like mine right now.
She went to die?
"Uuuuuuhhhhhh"
It was no longer even words.
I couldn't help it anymore.
I'm begging you.
Someone please kill me now.
I don't want to go through any more pain.
I won't ask you to turn back time.
I won't request that kind of thing.
So please, don't advance time anymore.
Let's just end it here.
I'm fine with a bad end, just end it.
Don't continue.
Don't continue, don't continue, don't continue!
Stop continuing with inertia!
"I think I'm gonna die..."
Surprisingly honestly, I thought that.

"I think I'm gonna die..."

At the very least, I will end.

Even if destiny and the inevitable and causality and fate don't end.

Only I will end.

I'm not afraid to die now.

Because I've only known despair.

"....."

With a two story building, jumping won't kill me. Is there a knife somewhere? There should at least be knives in the kitchen. And it's a former clinic, so there should be a scalpel or two around here. It's fine even if there's not. I just need to hit my head against the wall and I'll die. There are infinite ways to die. It's fine, after all it was a worthless life.

Let's just end it here.

The terminus.

The final stop.

The end.

"....."

Hime-chan and I were in a passing relationship. If it weren't for Aikawa-san, let alone encountering her, I wouldn't have known of her existence. She was a resident of another world. A resident of the same side as Shiogi-chan and Tamamo-chan. Even if she laughs friendly and thoughtlessly, even if she talks innocently and like she's having fun, even then, she's definitely different from me.

She's different, so she's unrelated.

Unrelated.

She is unrelated.

To begin with, I was bad at dealing with Hime-chan.

She's too familiar, she resembles Kunagisa.

And she resembles me.

I was bad at dealing with her.

What am I doing, dying for that?

I’m not that kind of guy.

I’m not such a good guy.

I’m a defective product.

My circuits that feel those kinds of things are broken.

I don’t have any emotions.

I’m not feeling any emotions.

I don’t feel anything.

I don’t feel.

I’m not sad.

"Because Hime-chan died... what does that do?"

I released Hime-chan’s body. She fell in the pool of blood with a splash, her small body. I stood up. I touched my face with my hands covered in blood. It had a slimy feeling. It feels disturbing. It feels disturbing. It feels disturbing. It feels disturbing. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting.

It feels good.

I licked my blood-stained fingers.

It had a bad taste.

That’s obvious.

Blood that has touched the air is just iron.

Such a thing isn’t a part of a human being.

"Let’s wait for help while drinking tea or something....."

If I go to the kitchen, I should be able to boil some hot water. I’m sure even Kunagisa will have various formalities to go through, and coming here would take about an hour.

I’ll wash away this blood in the shower room.

Then I’ll borrow a book from the library.

I’ll drink some tea and wait.

As I was about to start moving my feet towards the entrance.

"Ah, that’s right"
I turned around.
I had forgotten.
Good grief.
What am I doing forgetting important things like that?
I said.
"Hime-chan, you did good."

Bye bye.
Farewell.
Goodnight.

CHAPTER 8 —— PERSEVERANCE (FINAL STATION)

0

If you don't obtain trust, you can't betray.

1

This is what comes to mind when I hear the name Kunagisa Tomo.

Blue hair. Blue eyes. Friend. Innocent. Pure. Engineer. Same age. Only knows how to smile. Blue Savant. Kunagisa Syndicate. Kunagisa Nao. Kasumioka Douji. *Team*. Dead Blue. *Cheetah, Green Green Green, Double Flick, Reverse Cross*, *Cubic Loop*, *Dancing with Madness*, *Bad Kind*, *Trigger-Happy End*. Terrorist of the digital world. Blue fairy. Geocide. Can't go down stairs alone. Can't climb stairs alone. Recharging. Selfish. Miniature garden. Weak. Nocturnal. Single-mindedly concentrating on one thing. Unclear way of speaking. Boku-sama-chan. Feels good and fluffy when touched. Hates baths. Prussian blue. Doesn't grow. Absolute stoppage. Absolute stagnation. Tyrant. An existence like family. A concept like a little sister. Outstanding memory. Once she learns something, she never forgets it. Rich. Currently disowned. Apartment in Shirosaki. Mainframe. Her roots spread all over the world. Device. Inhuman. Atypical. An important existence for me. An irreplaceable existence for me. The existence I loved. Back when I wasn't fully broken, the existence I loved. The existence who thoroughly destroyed me. The existence I thoroughly destroyed.

"....."

Since then.

I don't know what happened since then.

But it was probably handled appropriately.

It's not a case on a secluded island, so it's probably impossible to completely erase it, but... at the very least, it wasn't an incident of a scale so large that it's impossible to cover it up. At most, only four humans died. It's

nothing when compared to a missile falling in a war. Four people is only half of eight, and a tenth of forty. That's all there was to it, after all.

Ah.....

Now that I think about it, it's a story without emotion.

Before I rushed over to Hime-chan, I asked for Kunagisa's help. Self-preservation was the first thing I thought of. Unconsciously, I ran towards self-preservation.

Really, I'm the worst.

I'm truly the worst.

"Ii-cha-n?"

After there was a knock and then the door opened.

Suddenly, blue hair from the other side.

It was Kunagisa.

"Ii-chan, did you wake up?"

"Mm.....? Woke up you say...."

Huh. I was sleeping.

So deeply that I couldn't dream.

Like I was dead. Like usual.

".....What time is it?"

"Ten at night. The hour boku-sama-chan begins operating."

"Ah... right, and what day is today?"

"Uni?"

"What day is today?"

"What, are you playing stupid? It's the 17th of August."

".....Um....."

Ah.

So that was still only yesterday's story.

Is that it?

I thought a hundred years had passed already.

"Ii-cha-n. Get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up-" Approaching me, clap clap clap clap clap clap clap, she hit a sixteen beat

rhythm on my cheeks. "When boku-sama-chan is awake and Ii-chan is sleeping, it's boring!"

".....That's my bad"

"I'm hungry. Make something."

"Okay."

I stood up.

Huh, I was sleeping while sitting?

That's quite skillful, if I say so myself.

".....Huh?" As I was leaving the room, I tilted my head. "Tomo... where are we?"

"In boku-sama-chan's home. Why are you asking that?"

"Why am I here?"

".....Kunagisa punch!"

I was hit with an uppercut.

From what I saw, she was pouting slightly.

"Come on, Ii-chan. Even though boku-sama-chan is generously taking care of you, if you say those kinds of things, you'll get punished!"

"Mm... Wait, wait. I remembered."

That's right.

I was picked up directly from the lab and put into an unknown car by a person I don't know and brought to Kunagisa's apartment without going back to my apartment, without contacting anyone.

After that, I mumbled a lot.

And after that, I slept.

As if I was dead, I slept.

"Ii-chan, have you not been sleeping much lately? You were sleeping a looot! Soundly sleeping. Or is it more like sleeping like a log?"

"Hmm."

"Boku-sama-chan played all sorts of pranks on Ii-chan."

"What?"

"Ufufufu," Kunagisa laughed wryly. "Ii-chan is quite bold when he's sleeping."

"Wha..."

"Fu." It was a nasty, provocative laugh. "Well, you can say what you want with your mouth, but your body is honest."

"You bastard! What did you do to my body!? Hey!"

"Kyahaha, wai--!"

While laughing like she was having fun, she escaped in the blink of an eye, as expected within her own residence. If she disappears in this huge apartment, there's no way I can catch her. What a guy... attacking someone in their sleep. Even I couldn't do such a fiendish act... But that's why I was short on sleep.

I mean it was a joke, right?

It was a joke, right, Kunagisa-san?

Really, I'm sorry for making you worry.

"....."

I gave up and headed to the kitchen, avoiding all the cables spread out under my feet like traps. It wasn't just on the floor, a countless amount of cables were fixed to the walls and ceiling. It was even worse than the last time I came here... It's as if a machine with a mind of its own was invading the space.

I opened the refrigerator in the kitchen.

.....It's a mystery how all the stuff I made last month was still here. I mean, most of the contents of the fridge were almost all gone. Did she spend the last half a month just eating junk food? What a monster. There was nothing I could do, so I gave up and changed focus to the freezer. There should still be a little hope there. Frozen food is quite dull, but... I'm not in a condition where I can make any sort of elaborate dishes. The condiments should still be here, ah, as expected, they were as I left them. I half-mindedly made some side dishes that might fill the stomach while cooking rice. The rice cooker. When Kunagisa eats she eats a lot. When she doesn't eat she

doesn't eat at all. She's that type. Which reminds me, the chef on that island... um, what was her name again? The dishes she served at a relatively regular basis were delicious to eat every day. If you get to that level, it changes everything up to your everyday habits.

After spending about an hour cooking, I called out, "Hey, Tomo, I made some food, so get over here!" but got no response. Either she didn't hear me, or she did hear me but pretended like she didn't. There were no trays or anything that convenient here. I had no choice, so I carried each plate one at a time into the dining room (from what I could see, this room seemed to not be used at all, and so there was quite a lot of dust piled up. Not to use Kuchiha-chan's words, but when people don't use something dust piles up. It's the same for humans). After carrying in one plate, I thought of cleaning up first, so I decided to go look for a rag. In the end, it wasn't until thirty minutes later that I was ready to call over Kunagisa. It didn't really matter what dish I made since it went cold anyway.

"Thanks for the food!"

"Eat up."

Greedly, Kunagisa extended her hands which were both equipped with chopsticks to the plate. When she's like this, voices can't reach her. In regards to the type of people that don't talk while eating, when it's like the fox-masked man it's cool, but in this case, she's just someone who's obsessed with food. If you don't eat while you can, you don't know when you might die from starvation. If she was like this even on the day of her medical checkup, Nao-san must have been quite worried about her... that guy is pretty obsessed with his little sister.

Little sister.

Rizumu-chan.

That's bad, I remembered.

"Thanks for the meal!"

"You're welcome."

After we both finished eating, I was about to gather up the plates and wash them quickly when, "Ah! Ii-chan. Ii-chan, Ii-chan, Ii-chan." Kunagisa called me.

"....You only have to say Ii-chan once."

"Okay, okay."

"You only have to say okay once too."

"I have something to report."

"Huh?"

Kunagisa had an expression like it wasn't much, a soft expression going funyaa like always, but since her sense of value is completely different from that of a normal person, you shouldn't trust in the emotions that you can read on her face.

"It's about the situation Ii-chan got involved with yesterday."

"Oh."

"It can't be covered up."

"Huh?" I put down the plates that I gathered, sat down, and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"How should I put it? It's a bit out of the jurisdiction of the Kunagisa Syndicate, and there's a slight problem. No, since boku-sama-chan is now an outsider, it's only hearsay, but..." Kunagisa said while staring at the empty plates. It was as if a part of her was thinking, should I lick the plates? What should I do? Will I get scolded? "Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku is fine. The caretaker Madoka Kuchiha is also fine. We can do something about those two. We can manage to do something about those two. After that, they'll become plains and mountains. I mean, no matter what, the future will take care of itself."

Assistant Professor Kigamine.

Kuchiha-chan.

"But the other two."

"The other two....."

"One of them, Yukariki Ichihime, is a resident of the same apartment where Ii-chan lives. And... Niounomiya Rizumu. Well, in her case, you could also call her Niounomiya Izumu, so technically speaking, it's three people.

Hime-chan.

Rizumu-chan.

Izumu-kun.

"Those three are outside the range of the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"There's... things that are outside the Kunagisa Syndicate's range? In that unarguably absolute organization?

"Rather than out of range, it's more like it's in someone else's yard, someone else's territory. How should I put it? It would be easier to understand if I drew it on a chart, but... well, I guess it's fine. This'll be a really lazy and simplified explanation, but please listen carefully."

".....My will to listen completely vanished with that lead in....."

"This world is split in four different stable worlds, and all of these worlds overlap with each other a little."

"Are you a cult leader or something....." I was a bit lost. "Please explain it with a more normal way of speaking."

"Ro-ger. Then, um, the four worlds, first there's the Normal World. The **here** and **now**, I guess. A world of war and peace, well-suited for everyday life. That is the base. The standard. If you want to think about how much you can use it as a standard, let's see, that place where Ii-chan studied abroad, the ER3 System, that is at the very limit of the *Normal World*.

".....You're saying **that** is *normal*?"

"Well, just barely. That's the bottom," Kunagisa explained as if carelessly reciting the multiplication table. "And as for the remaining three, if you say that the everyday world is the one on the front, then they're the back I guess. First, there's the world centered around the Kunagisa Syndicate. That is the World of Political Power. Ichigai, Nishiori, Sanzaka, Shikabane, Gotoride, Rokukase, the seventh name is skipped over, and lastly, Hachikiri. The Kunagisa Syndicate is what governs them. Since it's sort of like a society, it's

not that well known, but its power is quite wide. Then, you remember, right? ....Iria-chan. Iria-chan of Wet Crow's Feathers Island. The world centered on the Four Gods and One Mirror, including the Akagami family to which Iria belonged. That is the World of Financial Power. Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami, Ekagami, Origami. The financial conglomerates. If you want to compare it to something similar to that in the Surface World, then I guess the upper echelon of society would be there. You know that Rule is said to be the Japanese ER3 System, right? In reality, there's a paper-thin difference between them... they're both of equally bad character."

"Hmm... well, you may be right"

"Finally, the last world---the last both numerically and conceptually. ....There was that serial killer in May, right? The one you told me about before. That Zerozaki something person. With those kinds of evil spirits at its core, it's the World of Combat Abilities. In short, the inhabitants of that world are monsters. It gives the feeling of being a place where no human being should live. It's in a state where there are a variety of heterogeneous forces. Unlike the Kunagisa Syndicate and the Four Gods and One Mirror, the inhabitants of that world don't act with any objective in particular, but the abilities they possess are overwhelmingly dangerous. The rule there is that there are no rules. Being a match for one thousand is an expression that was created just for the sake of adapting to this... just the power of that expression is enough to make the other three worlds freeze, they're the personification of the grotesque. These three worlds have fused together in various ways, but while there is fusion, there is also opposition."

"Like a power balance. It's vague, but I remember having heard something about a three way deadlock... from when I was a child. Well, it's true, though, that I wasn't really aware of this six years ago....."

"Hmm. Then it'll be a quick explanation," Kunagisa said. It seems that she decided to not lick the plates, and she looked at me normally. "Ii-chan probably knows, but that Yukariki girl seems to have a link with the Origami, a branch of the Four Gods and One Mirror. She was one of the soldiers of their

private army... but boku-sama-chan doesn't think that Ii-chan doesn't know about that. And then, the Niounomiya are-"

"I know that too. They're killers."

"Yes. The Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya's Troupe. During the period when boku-sama-chan was a terrorist, I was very careful to not get involved with them. That was also the case even in the affair with Zerozaki-kun. They're too similar... so it's scary."

"Scary, huh?"

"Yes. And therefore, it's outside of our jurisdiction."

"*Therefore*, you say....."

"No, that's right. *Therefore* and that's the end of it. That's all. Not half-heartedly, but completely it doesn't concern me. That's where the logic establishes itself. Well, having said that, it doesn't seem to be as big of a deal as I was worried about. This won't break the power balance or anything like that. The balance is so completely and abnormally firm that it doesn't seem like the life of at most one or two people will do anything to it. However... that's precisely **why** it's difficult to cover it up."

"I don't really get it... what does that mean?"

"You see, I said that even in that three way deadlock, things are *merging together*, right? That's why every piece of information, whatever it is, will be passed over to **that side** by someone. Because of my family's circumstances, it's not something that can be completely closed off."

"Ah, that's what that meant...."

You can't seal a person's mouth.

It might not be such a simple problem, but ultimately, that's what it is.

"But I don't think that means you can't cover it up... In short, you just need to not leak it to the *front*, the Surface World. Isn't that right?"

"When boku-sama-chan says we can't hide it..." Kunagisa lifted the ends of both of her eyes with her index fingers. I didn't think it resembled that person at all, but I knew who it was. "That means that I can't hide it from Jun-chan."

"....."

Aikawa... Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

"It was that Yukariki girl, right? She was involved with Jun-chan and had a relationship with Jun-chan, right? That's a bit bad for Ii-chan." Kunagisa continued without stopping. "Because it seems like that Yukariki-chan died because of Ii-chan."

For a moment.

Excuses tried to pass through my mouth.

That's not it. That's wrong.

But I couldn't say it.

Because... it was true.

It was true.

"Well, it's Jun-chan so I doubt she's going to blame you, but it'll be awkward. If I could hide it then I would have done so, but if **that side** were to step in, it would be impossible. If it's not exposed from the inside, then Jun-chan will definitely find out from somewhere else. That's because Jun- chan is familiar with all of the three worlds I just mentioned. And also, I introduced Chii-kun to her the other day. So if she wants to know something, then there's nothing in the galaxy she can't find out. Really, that was a failure. Boku-sama-chan had promised not to introduce anyone in the first place. That's why boku-sama-chan will try to help as much as possible, but even then, I can only hide *that* from Jun-chan for three days at most.."

"I didn't really intend to hide it from Aikawa-san"

"Hmm?"

"I only asked for your help because if there were five people and four died, then I would certainly be the culprit. If that happened, it would be inconvenient in a variety of ways. As long as you don't have me there, you don't have to cover up the incident itself."

"Hmm."

"That's why it's fine if Aikawa-san finds out. Rather, that's what I want. I don't know the reason why that incident happened, but... if I don't know, then I'm fine with not knowing. Aikawa-san will solve this case beautifully like always."

"**The reason why that happened**, huh." Kunagisa repeated with some hidden meaning. "I'll ask just in case. Ii-chan, in this case, is Ii-chan not the culprit?"

".....What makes you think that?"

"The same reason you said earlier. If there were five people and four died, the last person is usually the culprit."

"Are you doubting me?"

"I trust you. It's verification. If I don't completely understand the situation, then I can't cover it up. If you killed them, then won't you please just say that you killed them? If it's corrected later, then it'll be pretty troublesome. Even the power of the Kunagisa Syndicate is not limitless."

".....I didn't kill them"

"Really?"

"Really. That's not a lie"

That's right, I didn't kill them.

I didn't kill anyone.

At the very least, it's just those four people.

As a matter of fact, I have multiple personalities and at night, when I was supposed to be asleep, I killed those other four people. As long as the punchline in the end doesn't turn out to be something like that out of a stereotypical mystery novel, then I didn't kill anyone.

"Hmm." Kunagisa nodded. "Then, this time. I didn't ask you yesterday since you seemed to be really tired, but can you tell me the full story? This time, what exactly did you do in that place that boku-sama-chan doesn't know about?"

"Um... how should I say it?"

From where should I begin?

After some hesitation, I decided to start with the day I first met Assistant Professor Kigamine, the first of August. Of course, I didn't remember every detail, so I cut out some parts like about Miiko-san, the conversation with the fox-masked man, and the things that weren't related to the story. Also, while there was absolutely no reason to, I said that Kasugai-san was living at Hime-chan's place.

It took me thirty minutes to finish the story.

It made me feel like it was just that.

All that happened in just thirty minutes.

It's ephemeral.

"Hmm..."

"Tomo, do you have any ideas?"

"Hmm... well, I guess I have a hypothesis."

"What's the hypothesis?"

"In this case, it's usually a domino murder."

"What's that?"

"A was killed by B, B was killed by C, and C was killed by a trap that A had set up before they died. So everyone dies, that's the pattern. It's a type of mystery novel."

"Hmm... there's people out there thinking about some weird stuff. But you know..."

Setting aside Assistant Professor Kigamine who was an ordinary person.

Madoka Kuchiha's deathless body.

Niounomiya Rizumu, Rizumu the *Carnival*.

Niounomiya Izumu, Izumu the *Man Eater*.

And... Zig Zag's disciple, Yukariki Ichihime.

"To be honest, I can't even imagine a single human being winning in a one on one against Hime-chan, and it doesn't even matter if you keep increasing the number of people. The *string techniques* she uses, it's basically something developed to fight against multiple people. It's the ultimate defensive technique. It's like being wrapped in a spider's web."

"Hmm... *Carnival* is still the *Man Eater*, in either case it's still Niounomiya-kun. However, if you strike when it's *Carnival* on the surface, then you should be fine. Although, if that was the case, then she wouldn't have been able to survive for that long... Maybe since they said that it was a split personality, they're able to control when one of them comes out and the other goes away to some extent."

"Pain or a feeling of danger is the signal. He said something like that. In regards to Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, we could just sum it up by saying that they were Izumu-kun's *targets*, but... there's also the fact that Izumu-kun was killed and that Hime-chan, who was unrelated, was also killed... It's complicated. Or rather, it's impossible."

"What about the possibility of them killing each other?"

"Huh?"

"They killed each other. The strong ones crushed each other."

Killed each other.

Hime-chan and... Izumu-kun?

"But then the corpses would be in the same place, wouldn't they. One was in the courtyard, and the other in a room on the second floor. They're in completely different places."

"Right. I was just asking." Kunagisa went hmm while nodding, as if she were digesting the information, and continued. "Suicide. The person who survived the battle royale then committed suicide."

"That's impossible. No matter who you take, it's impossible to commit such a suicide."

She who had her upper body and lower body ripped in two.

She who had her neck snapped and her right shoulder ripped off.

She who had her neck cut through and a hole opened in her chest.

She who had lost both of her arms and had her neck twisted.

That kind of suicide doesn't exist.

That kind of accident doesn't exist.

Only...

The image of being killed and thrown away.

The image of being eaten and scattered.

"Then it would be the crime of someone outside of the group, but..."

"Yeah... it may be natural to think so through the process of elimination, but that would require an outsider appearing. There was no room for an outsider to appear. In that sense, it's like a stormy mountain retreat similar to Wet Crow's Feather Island, or like a lonely island similar to Shadou Kyouichirou's Research Facility."

"Huh. What about Kasugai-chan who went home first?" Kunagisa said. "Couldn't you say that Kasugai-chan was not not not not not not an outsider?"

"....I can't tell whether that was a positive or a negative question, but that's also not possible. Because that person is Kasugai-san, you know?"

"I see."

Kunagisa Tomo was convinced.

It seems it was a convincing answer.

It's Kasugai-san, you know?

It's a reason more eloquent than any elaborate logic.

"And also, even if there was an outsider.... or even if there was a secret basement in that lab and someone besides Kuchiha-chan had been living there in hiding, the problem is the same. They can't win against Hime-chan or Izumu-kun. It's impossible to kill those two. That's certain..."

As long as it wasn't Aikawa Jun.

As long as the strongest card wasn't used.

"....Yeah. In that case, the reason why Ii-chan was the only insider who was able to sleep until morning would become a mystery... Hmm. Having listened to that story, there's only one reasonable hypothesis that remains in the end."

"A hypothesis?"

"Want to hear it?"

"Ah, no...." I slurred my words. "It's fine. It doesn't concern me."

"Hmm... well, at the point where a *Killing Name* is involved, it's also something quite far from boku-sama-chan's tastes....." Kunagisa said.

"But if there's a culprit in this case, then he is pretty pragmatic. You know, in mystery novels, I don't know why, but they often kill people one at a time. One by one, one by one, in order. But if you think about it normally, it would be more efficient to do all of that at once. A one hit kill, one hit withdrawal. That's a basic on the battlefield.

"Pragmatic, huh...."

In other words... not skewed. Evenly distributed. To put it plainly, that's what it is, but is it really, in the truest sense, definitely *that*? That situation, that scene, seemed to be very far from those words.

That was skewed.

Very skewed.

While thinking about the meaning of the word *pragmatic*, I looked in Kunagisa's direction, and Kunagisa also stared at me. Then, after looking a bit hollow, as if she was thinking about something,

"Hey, Ii-chan."

She said.

"Perhaps, Ii-chan, are you feeling down? For a while there, you didn't seem to be very lively."

"Feeling down....." I hesitated to answer that sudden question. "...Ah, I am."

"Why?"

"That's... people I knew died. And it was four people at once. Anyone would feel down."

"That's weird." Kunagisa tilted her head curiously. "Don't say that. Up to now, how many people do you think have died around us? After all that, adding four more is nothing. Don't mind it. It's okay, it's okay." Nihaha, Kunagisa laughed lightly, without any ill will. "In the first place, it's a weird story. The ones who died were those four, it was neither Ii-chan nor boku-sama-chan who died, right? Then it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't... matter"

That's right.

That may be right.

Kunagisa is alive.

Kunagisa Tomo is alive.

Here, talking with me like this.

Then it's fine.

The world hasn't changed at all.

It keeps flowing as it is.

Destiny... is making it flow.

"Why don't you come here?"

".....Eh?"

"Why don't you come live here? That's what I said. After all, there are so many empty rooms here. Come live together with boku-sama-chan."

"....."

"After all, it'll be hard for Ii-chan to come back to your apartment, won't it? Even if you can hide the incident, even if you can hide the truth, the reality is that you can't hide that Yukariki-chan won't come back anymore. If that happens, it'll become awkward with everyone in the apartment, right?"

That's right.....

It's not just about Aikawa-san. Nanananami, Houko-chan, Moeta-kun, Koutoumaru... and Miiko-san. Everyone, everyone, everyone, liked Hime-chan.

And I ruined that.

....With kind of face should I go back home with?

"I'll get the Fiat's tires repaired and deliver it to the parking lot. Inevitably, that will also mean you'll have to cut ties with Neon-chan from last time, but it can't be helped, right? Or does Ii-chan have some attachment?"

"Attachment....."

"It's okay to say it, you know? Boku-sama-chan doesn't really mind that kind of stuff. Whether it's whining or complaining, I will receive it all with my big love." Kunagisa leaned forward, as if crawling on the table, moving her face toward me. "Or maybe is it that Ii-chan is more interested in living together with Kasugai-chan?"

".....So you knew?"

"If it's about Ii-chan, then usually"

Kunagisa smiled broadly.

Her big eyes became slightly narrower.

"That's why it doesn't really bother boku-sama-chan. No matter who you like, who you love, who attracts you, who you embrace, who you kiss, who you have sex with. I don't care at all about all of that, rather, I'd even support you. If Ii-chan is having fun, then it's all fine. There's no need for distortion, it's fine if Ii-chan just keeps being Ii-chan. If you became an honest person, then I would be very happy for you. After all, I'm interested in what kind of person Ii-chan will become. Ii-chan's happiness is my happiness. That's why Ii-chan is free to do and to think whatever he wants... but, just one thing."

Kunagisa's eyes....

Changed from blue to blue.

Clearer.

Purer.

"If Ii-chan stops being *mine*, I will destroy the Earth. If Ii-chan disappears from my side again like in the past, at that time, there won't be a next time. If I don't have Ii-chan , then I don't want anyone else. I will destroy everything without leaving a trace. I will erase everything until not even cinders remain."

".....To... mo."

"Well, ehehe, you already know that so much that I don't even have to say it, right? Ii-chan is a clever guy...."

She laughed cheerfully.

Sincerely, innocently, like an innocent youth....

And so it was an arrogant, bewitching laugh.

I had no other choice but to nod.

Inside whose palms did I, did my body exist... I was made painfully aware of that again.

"Yeah, I know. It's obvious, right?"

"That's right. It's fine, Ii-chan is fine. Ufufu, even without doing anything, Ii-chan is the messiah, the hero. Ii-chan is an admirable person who is currently saving the world. That's pretty amazing, isn't it? Thanks to Ii-chan, today is peaceful again, right?"

".....Right"

"Ehehe. Iichan. Iichan. Iichan." Seeing me nod, Kunagisa suddenly wrapped her arms around my back and hugged me. Kunagisa's weight pressed down on me heavily. "Ii-chan, I love you!"

"Ah... yeah"

It's... fine already.

Thinking is bothersome.

Living is bothersome.

Then.

Being drowned is fine.

If you're crazy then go crazy. If you're broken, then break down. Someone who's ill shouldn't just walk down the road. Resigning myself and sinking silently is what's called being resolute. Rather than just following destiny or rebelling against it, just be swept away... That is the way of life for a defeated person.

"Hey, Tomo."

I said.

"Do lewd things to me."

".....Hmm?"

Kunagisa moved her chin and placed it on my shoulder, and then rubbed her head against my face. What kind of face she was making, I couldn't even imagine.

"Is it fine?"

".....It's fine"

By now, anything.

By now, I didn't care about anything anymore.

The world is not filled with despair, the world is despair itself. The world is hell, what about it? Don't want and you won't get robbed. If there is a door, then turn back. Don't cry, don't laugh, that has no meaning. Both believers and nonbelievers will equally not be saved.

Then.

Stagnate.

Settle down.

Drown.

Make me yours.

"Then let's do it... Wait, today is no good."

".....Why?"

"I have another health checkup tomorrow. If we do anything lewd today, Nao-kun will know"

".....That was it. A health checkup. Did they find something?"

"Yes." Kunagisa briefly separated from me. Briefly. Briefly. Briefly. "You know. Here and there, it seems to be in a pinch? Well there's nothing we can do about it. For boku-sama-chan, from the start, it's like I'm forcing something to live even though it is wrong."

"And... how long do you have?"

"Oh, it's not something that urgent. I'll be fine for two or three years, I think. It depends on tomorrow's results."

"I see... then we're postponing it"

"That's right. Ah, but what if it's only halfway..."

"No." I stood up from my chair. "Let's save the fun for later. I'll go get my stuff."

"Uni?"

"We'll be living together, right? Here, together."

".....Ah, is it fine?"

"What do you mean? It was you who invited me."

"No, I just thought you'd have some more lingering attachment. I knew that you'd eventually come to that decision but it was quicker than I thought. Big surprise."

"I'll also quit university and... I'll live here leisurely with you for the rest of my life... Quick? That's not it. With what happened this time, I was made well aware."

How much I was yearning for something that I didn't deserve.

How much I was broken as a human.

In reality, I should have fully realized it back in May.

Let's stop now.

Don't involve unrelated people.

Don't involve the world.

Let's close it now.

Let's close myself.

"Ufufu. If so, then let's spend all day flirting. Let's lead a life of obscenity. Boku-sama-chan and you, are we Adam and Eve?"

"That would be the kind of miniature garden that you like. Superimposed, superimposed."

"But if it's just luggage, then you can just send someone to get it, you know? If Ii-chan himself went to the apartment, it'd be troublesome if you met someone, right? Then wouldn't it be best if you were to quietly disappear?"

"It's fine. It's already night time, so everyone should be asleep," I said. "And I also have some things that I don't want people to touch."

"Ii-chan."

"Yeah?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm relieved." Kunagisa confessed to me along with a smile. "If you spend time with a person like Jun-chan, anyone would change. Ii-chan is not an exception. I thought things like, 'is he going to change?' Because Jun-chan is a big exception. Her charisma isn't half-baked, it's special. Yeah, she's definitely special. From the start, Ii-chan has been a passive person, so you're influenced by other people quite easily. Going back five years to America, it seems like a lot of things happened there and I wondered if you would change. In fact, you did change a lot. But."

But.

However.

Kunagisa said.

"Ii-chan will never change."

Kunagisa said.

"Ii-chan will really never change."

Kunagisa said.

"Ii-chan will never change. Forever."

Kunagisa said.

Kunagisa said.

Kunagisa said.

2

Kunagisa Tomo, who rarely goes outside, didn't have any machine with mobile abilities. In other words, she didn't possess any car or motorcycle. So I returned to my run-down apartment by walking. Kunagisa offered to call a taxi, but I turned her down. I don't intend on saying something pretentious like I was in the mood for a walk. I simply wanted some time to prepare myself.

Prepare.

I lied to Kunagisa about having important stuff I didn't want people to touch. Nothing is important to me. Neither to this world nor to me. For this world and for me.

There's not a single important thing.

Then it's attachment.

What Kunagisa was talking about, attachment.

I wanted to go back at least once to the apartment.

Go back and see everyone one last time.

".....Saying that would also be false."

Ah, that's also false.

I don't want to see anyone.

I have no intention of seeing them.

If I saw them, what would we talk about?

"But... that's still lingering attachment, isn't it....."

Do I want to be consoled?

Do I want to be insulted?

Do I think I'm performing in some TV drama?

It's ridiculous.

It's beyond ridiculous

"It's nonsense within nonsense..."

It was about 3:30 in the middle of the night when I arrived at Senbon Nakadachiuri. I wasn't wearing a watch, and my phone was still turned off, so it was just a guess.

In front of the entrance to the apartment.

Suddenly, I met Kasugai-san.

An ambush.

Really, like a god of death.

What's this person doing here in the middle of the night?

"....Oh. Oh my."

"....."

"Welcome home."

".....Kasugai-san. It looks like you're fine."

"You're quite late. And adding to that, you don't seem to be *fine*.

".....Yeah."

"Where's the Fiat?"

"I left it there."

"Where's Hime-chan?"

"She's dead."

"Is that so. Hmm." Kasugai-san nodded without any emotion as if it was nothing. For this person, the death of a human being, whether it be someone else or herself, she had only that much recognition for it. She reached that position, that stage, long ago. "Then I'll move to the room downstairs. After all, a four tatami room is too cramped for two people to live in. That thing about taking half a tatami when you're awake and one tatami when you're asleep was a lie, you know."

"....."

"What's with that face you're making? That face. No, no. You should stop that." Kasugai-san crossed her arms, as if to confront me. "Don't try to make other people sad just because you don't feel sad. I don't have that kind of emotion. Demanding something you can't do out of someone is unfair, and asking someone to do something they can't do is also unfair."

".....I guess so."

"Not being able to mourn someone's death isn't particularly a bad thing, don't try to blame it on me. And also I should have warned you about this. I don't want to hear any complaints."

"I understand....." I said, holding back most of what I wanted to say. In reality, I didn't want to understand what Kasugai-san was saying, even though I'm sure I couldn't comprehend it anyway, but arguing with this person is essentially meaningless. "But please let me just confirm one thing... that bad feeling you had was mainly about Kuchiha-chan, right?"

"Correct."

Correct.

As expected of a biologist.

And this is a biologist who generally specializes in *animals*.

".....You don't have to bother moving to Hime-chan's room. I'm leaving."

"Yeah? You'll do that?"

As expected, Kasugai-san was surprised.

"Yeah. That's why I came to collect my things... I'm going to Kunagisa's place. I can't face everyone else right now, and besides, it's something that I've been thinking about for a while."

"Hmm."

Kasugai-san didn't say anything

That's the kind of person she is.

She has no opinion.

"It was a short relationship."

"Enough to be too long."

"I'm feeling a bit lonely."

"Really?"

"Who knows... I wonder how it is really. Well, I'm going to the convenience store now. Be sure to leave before I get back. Bye bye."

Kasugai-san said this without changing her expression and passed by me. Really, with words as casual as if we'd see each other again tomorrow as a matter of course, she passed me by.

I didn't return any words.

Not even goodbye or farewell. Not even sorry or good day. I felt that these words were not suited towards that person.

But should I have said something?

Like, let's meet again if we have a connection.

"……..Why?"

Why did this happen?

It shouldn't have been like this.

But of course, that was something needless to think about, as I had thought about it over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, as if just the number of times that I thought about it would give me the answer. That it's my fault.

The cause in the cause and effect was me.

It's better to not have any ties.

Isn't that what that means?

I looked up at the apartment. It kinda feels… even though it's only been two days since I haven't been back… it already felt like I didn't know this place at all.

A wanderer.

What a bad word.

Really, what a bad word.

While hesitating, I took a step inside. Naturally, there wasn't anything particularly special. It didn't feel any different from when I was walking on the asphalt earlier. It didn't change.

I haven't changed.

I don't need Kunagisa to tell me that.

It's fine.

Let's give up already. Let's stop already.

It’s pathetic for a weak person to just move their feet, isn’t it?

It’s unsightly to see a loser struggle, isn’t it?

Know yourself.

An inexperienced person shouldn’t make merry.

Don’t move forward while lacking the ability.

Pull back.

A corpse shouldn’t pretend to be a living person.

There will be something to lose.

Let’s admit it.

I lost a long time ago.

Admit it, not with just empty words.

Honestly.

"I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good I’m no good."

Truly no good.

Climbing the stairs, I went into my room.

Let’s see... A change of clothes, my passport, and... my insurance card. My books... I guess it’s fine to leave them. I still have enough books to read piled up at Kunagisa’s place. Then everything that I’m taking should fit in a gym bag.

I unlocked the door and entered.

It’s dark.

I turned on the lights.

"....."

"....."

Miiko-san was there.

Her black jinbei seemed to have melted into the darkness.

She noticed me entering the room.

".....Welcome home... I guess?"

"....."

"You’re not gonna say 'I’m home?'"

".....Please don't act like you can see through me." I ignored her and walked towards the closet. Alright, I think I left the passport around here somewhere... "And also, please don't enter into other people's rooms without their permission."

"I was worried about you."

"Worried? ....That's unnecessary."

"Hmm... where's Hime?"

Shut up.

You're irritating.

Why should I have to explain everything?

It has nothing to do with me.

Hime-chan too.

You too.

So stop running your mouth even though it doesn't concern you.

"She's dead."

"Hmm."

Miiko-san nodded normally.

She took out an iron fan from her pocket and opened it with a *bam*.

"And?"

"What is it?"

"Why are you here when Hime is dead?"

".....Because even if Hime-chan dies, I don't die. Because it doesn't concern me---"

With almost no sound, with almost no opening.

The iron fan hit my cheek.

A shock as if I had been struck by lightning ran through my cheeks and I was sent flying away from the closet. I hit the wall with my shoulder, and with quite the momentum, I hit my head. It hurt. The pain in my cheeks continued to hurt. The wound Izumu-kun inflicted on me must have opened. Even though it was finally about to heal.....

It hurts.

What was that for?

"I can at least tell by the look on your face that something happened, but I don't know what it was," Miiko-san said flatly. "I'm not even really interested, but answer the question. Why are you here, and where are you planning to go?"

".....I'm running away. Because I'm scared."

Am I running away?

Am I scared?

That's right.

I'm scared, so I'll run away.

That's obvious.

I'm only doing what's obvious.

It's not my fault. Don't get angry at me. Don't blame me.

"Hmmm."

"I also don't want to cause any trouble... **Extraordinary losers should stay with the losers, the grotesque should stay with the grotesque**."

"Hmm... Grotesque, huh?" Miiko-san crouched down to my eye level as I still sat there. "Inoji. To me, crying when you're sad, getting angry when something bad happens, laughing when something fun happens, being happy when you fall in love, fighting those that you hate, feeling lonely when you're alone, and getting along with others isn't what makes someone human."

"....."

"You call yourself a defective product, but I don't think--"

"Shut up!"

I...

Without understanding why, I screamed.

"Don't talk like you know me! Don't look down on me! Why are you pitying me, am I that pathetic?! You don't even know anything about me! It

shouldn't have been like that, it's weird! It shouldn't have been like that, it doesn't make sense even to me! I don't know why it became like this! But it happened and there's nothing I can do! I don't even care anymore! It's not like it's the first time! Until now, how many people, how many people, how many people, how many dozens, how many hundreds, how many thousands have died because of me?! After all that, even if one or two or three or four people die, I don't feel anything!"

I grabbed Miiko-san's collar violently.

Ah.

I want to tear her apart like this.

I want to tear her up into pieces and destroy her.

Anger had taken over me.

Was I mad at Miiko-san telling me that?

Yeah. That's right.

It's not because Hime-chan died.

It's not because Hime-chan died.

"In the first place, I thought that Hime-chan was annoying because she was always clinging to me! I smiled at her by chance, but somehow she got the idea that we were friends! I always thought she was an impertinent and selfish brat! I feel relieved now that she's gone! I don't care about her anymore!"

"....."

"Miiko-san, you too! You too, always, always, talking like you know it all! If you truly understand my feelings, then don't say something so insensitive! Don't pretend like you trust me! Every time I hear those enlightened words of yours, I get annoyed! What's with the older sister act, do you think I'll be grateful!? You act so nice, but what exactly have you done for me! Don't say there's hope for someone who's in despair! Are you going to take responsibility for giving me hope?! That kind of thing is disgusting! It's disgusting, like walking on cardboard with socks on! A failure will always be

a failure, and so, as long as they don't have any hope, they won't fall further into despair! Why won't you let me give up, isn't it fine already!?"

I spat it out.

I spat out everything that I had been holding back.

"It's people like you that I hate the most!"

I had the urge to laugh.

After all, it was just that.

A bond between two people.

Connections.

Consideration. Kindness. Compassion.

Wanting to help. Wanting to protect.

Trusting. Counting on others.

What a joke.

Clinging to others like that is foolish.

It ruins the mood.

It spoils everything.

People can only live alone. There's no such thing as a relationship without betrayal. Where is there a human relationship where there's no betrayal? There's no such thing. Everyone betrays someone, everyone gets betrayed by someone, and they still all just trust each other until the end. That's all. They all betray someone in the end.

Betray.

Then I just need to betray them.

Trusting someone.

Trusting myself.

I wanted to do that, I really did.

But I couldn't.

It's impossible.

Don't say such unreasonable things.

Can’t you see that I did my best?

Can’t you see that I managed to get here by doing my best?

At this point, please just let give up.

Rather, you should praise me.

I won’t be able to do it again.

Never again for all eternity.

So just praise me.

Isn’t this enough already?

This is who I am.

Hate me, despise me, ridicule me.

I don’t care what you say, I’ll take any abuse you dish out. I’m a pathetic guy who deserves all kinds of slander. I don’t care about anyone. I’ve destroyed everything that I cared about. Nobody who’s been by my side has ever been happy.

Nobody can exist by my side.

"It’s fine already, just leave me alone, it’s only irritating when you worry about me! Even you must be fed up with pain in the ass like me, right!? It’d feel nice to cut ties with an idiot like me, right!? You actually hate me and despise me too, right!? Then please just let me go---"

"Inoji."

She firmly gripped my face.

And slammed it into the wall.

The whole apartment creaked and it felt like the wall was going to break.

All of the air was forced out of my lungs and I couldn’t breathe.

I couldn’t say anything.

I couldn’t... say anything.

"Don’t tell me how I feel."

"Uh....."

"You can say whatever you want about me, you can think whatever you want about me, but don't tell me what to do with your assumptions... Just what are you getting upset about?"

"Uuuuh....."

"It's not me, right?"

She held my face firmly so I couldn't look away.

Miiko-san brought her face close.

Her eyes were sharp.

Please stop.

Stop looking at me with those eyes.

I truly don't like getting involved with other people.

Why does nobody understand?

"Shut up... please. Just stop... already, please. Please forgive me... I'm sorry... Please forgive me....." While exhaling, I forced those words out weakly. "I... said it, right? Did I ask for your pity? Did I say I wanted to get along with you? It's fine already. It's already too late for me. It's all... it's all too late."

".....Hmm."

Miiko-san...

She let go of me.

Ah.

Regrets were piling up in my chest.

I was disappointed.

I was thrown away.

No.

I hate this.

I hate being looked down on.

But I hate being abandoned even more.

Being thought of like that by this person...

By Miiko-san.

"Then you really are no good."

Miiko-san closed her iron fan with a *bam*.

"Then you truly are worthless."

"Ah....."

I knew that.

But having it be told by someone.

Being told that by you.

"A guy who can't even protect one girl, who didn't even try to protect her and just makes excuses doesn't deserve to live. Someone who just wallows in his own incompetence doesn't deserve to live."

And then, she took something out of her fan.

It was a hidden knife.

It looked like a kogatana, but from the shape, it was closer to a shuriken.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to die?"

"....."

"You were always saying things about how there's no meaning to life. You've always been saying pessimistic things like that, haven't you? So then,

I will kill you.

You won't need to live pointlessly anymore."

"....Thats."

No, isn't she right?

It might be as she says.

That's right, what am I doing living pointlessly like this?

I don't need to, right?

There's no need to draw out my life.

If she's gonna kill me, then I might as well get killed.

Oh. So that was it. I didn't want to be consoled, and I didn't want to be blamed.

I wanted to be killed.

"The responsibility for having given you hope... I'll be taking it now. Ah, well, you know. Killing Inoji after finally getting along with you will be hard for me, but that just means your suffering and mine will be equal."

Ah.....

I can't move.

I can't escape.

But I'm not afraid.

Isn't it fine like this?

Huh?

Is it fine?

I... did I get something wrong?

Wait.

Wait a minute.

"One."

Hyun. Miiko-san moved her right arm sharply through the air.

The knife became a blur.

Ah, I'm dead, I thought.

Then.

As I thought that.....

"Two."

Miiko-san's movements weren't finished.

The blade moved back and then moved back and forth, repeatedly.

"Three, four, five, six."

Every time the blade ran through....

My right cheek was cut.

At the same time that the movements finally stopped, all of the cuts opened up at once. An extraordinary amount of blood came pouring out of those six cuts, but... Miiko-san dropped her small blade on the tatami, put her palms on my cheek, and softly, gently, pushed to stop the bleeding.

"There. Like that, you've now died six times."

"....."

The pain in my cheek prevented me from speaking.

I could taste blood in my mouth, even though it should have been closed. It seems that some of those cuts went through my cheek. As expected, the taste of my blood was awful. Awful. It's the first time I've ever tasted such awful blood. It tasted like iron. But the color of the blood covering Miiko-san's hands was neither green nor purple, it was red.

It wasn't blue either.

A bright red.

"Now you've been reborn six times at once... so if you say some stupid stuff again, you truly are no good. I really will kill you"

"....."

"So what will you do?"

"....I'm not sure." I answered while repressing the pain in my cheek. "But... someone like me, what are you saying I can do?"

"At the very least, you can do more than me."

Miiko-san said straightforwardly.

"I'm incompetent. All I'm good at is swinging a sword. But what about you? There's a lot you can do, right? You... you just haven't been doing the things you can do, haven't you?"

"....Just not doing them....."

"You're sad, aren't you?" Miiko-san said quietly. "You're sad that... Hime isn't here anymore, right? Then just say so. Why are you blaming yourself and screaming at me? That's not what you need to be doing right now, is it?"

Sad?

Is that so?

Am I... sad that Hime-chan died?

Really.

"That's... right."

I said.

I confessed.

It was almost like it was my last words.

"It's just that, Miiko-san, I... until now, I've hurt many people. I've made many miserable, I've made many go through painful experiences, and I've neglected many people. Hime-chan was just another victim of that. At this point, for me... for me to grieve someone's death... I've already forgotten how many I hurt, how many I tricked, how many I deceived, how many I cheated. I've never counted how many I betrayed, how many I used, how many I sold out. I responded to affection with contempt, and responded to love with hatred. I've never trusted anybody, and I only saw those who trusted in me as liars. No matter what anyone said to me and no matter what I said to anyone, I was completely unaffected. I never thought that someone could ever love me unconditionally. I was an irreparable defective product. It's already been too late for me since a long time ago, so that's why, at this point, for me to feel something like sadness would just be---"

"That's enough!"

With a shout, Miiko-san grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and raised me upwards in an instant. I couldn't reach the floor with my feet, my trachea was completely closed, and I really couldn't breathe.

"Do you think that childish nonsense will get through to me?! Do you think the words of someone who has never had an honest conversation with anyone will resonate in anyone's heart! It must be nice to decide that you can't do anything and act depressed! Try imagining what it's like for me to watch you! Why can't you tell that you won't get anywhere like that!?"

"Miiko... san..."

"I don't care if you're miserable or you're struggling, just do something! Even if it's pathetic, it's far better than doing nothing! Struggle, wriggle, that's fine! Everyone lives while deceiving themselves like that! Don't choose an unfair way of life where you're the only one suffering!"

Miiko-san glared at me.

There were traces of tears in her eyes.

Even as she yelled, her voice choked.

"Listen up! No matter how many you've hurt, how many you've tricked, how many you've deceived, how many you've disrespected, how many you've betrayed, how many you've used, or how many you've sold out! No matter how many you've hurt, or how many you've made miserable! Even if you're a fool, even if you're unsightly! Even if it's too late, even if it's past the point of no return! Even if you're a defective product who can't trust anyone, or a human failure that murders people!"

"...Why would something like that mean that you can't feel sadness?"

"....."

Suddenly.

Something... it felt like something fell.

Suddenly, I felt my body becoming light. Everything that I had been obsessed with until now, everything that had restrained me now felt like it was a thin, brittle cage.

Who had been restraining me? Who held the key to these shackles?

".....You liked Ichihime, didn't you?"

".....Yes"

"It was fun having her around, right?"

".....Yes"

"Thanks to her, you were happy, right?"

".....Yes!"

I....

I nodded with conviction.

Hime-chan.

She was always cheerful like an idiot.

She was selfish and cried a lot.

She was easy to fool, but a liar.

She easily mixed up her words and was bad at studying.

But she was very hard working and was always doing her best.

She was an incredible girl.

Ah, that's right.

These past two months.

They were fun because Hime-chan was there.

Why didn't I notice that until now?

That I was so blessed.

That I was so happy.

Remember it. Remember it all.

Hime-chan's words. Hime-chan's appearance.

Down to the last strand of hair.....

I couldn't forget her even if I tried. It would be so much easier for me to forget her but, even then, I couldn't. How could I have forgotten that even though it was so much fun?

I want to shout it out. Even now, I want to go and tell her with all my heart. That even if it was only for a short while, you've managed to bring joy to a single hopeless person, to someone who had no happiness in his life.

And not to just me.

To Miiko-san and everyone else too.

I'm sure to Aikawa-san too.

What was I born for?

With what meaning was I born?

At the very least... not to feel like this.

If it was to feel like this, then I would rather have not been born. If it was for this pathetic feeling, for the feeling like it would be far better to just die, I would rather have not been born.

That's what I had thought.

I don't have any intention to take it back.

There's no way I could take it back.

I came to think that everything was a mistake.

I came to think that living itself was a mistake.

I came to think that everything was a failure.
I came to think that not dying itself was a failure.
Then why is it?
Really, why is it?
That I still wouldn't wish that I had never known Hime-chan....

"I...."
I said, feeling the taste of blood in my mouth
"The fact that Hime-chan... I really hate it."
"Yeah."
"I'm sad that Hime-chan died."
"Yeah... that's right."
Miiko-san let go of me.
I landed on the ground with a thump.
I was relieved.
The ground was stable.
"I'm sad too."
"....Miiko-san."
I touched my cheek.
It was wet and sticky with blood.
"I... have found something to do."
"Is that so?"
"Something I have to do"
"I see."
Miiko-san gave a small nod.
"You'll be back, right?"
"Yes... but I don't when that will be."
"That doesn't bother me. You can come back home whenever you want." Miiko-san said boldly. "That's because this place is your home, after all."
"....That's right."
I forcefully wiped the blood off my cheek.

Though my clothes were already soaked in blood.

Well, it suits me.

Since the beginning, I've been living as if I was already dead.

Living as if I was dying.

So I'll struggle.

I'll struggle pathetically.

There's hell in front of me, but there's also hell behind me.

Let's turn back the clock and repeat.

I'll continue living.

Like I'm dying. Like I'm already dead.

No matter what anyone else thinks.

So what?

"Well, I'll be going now."

"Yeah. Be careful."

I looked back before leaving.

Miiko-san had her arms crossed as she watched me go.

It looked like she was faintly smiling.

That's right....

I love her smile.

"Miiko-san."

"What is it?"

"When I come back, I'll probably confess to you, so please think about your answer."

"Confess? ....What, do you like me?"

"Yes... about as much as Miiko-san likes me."

".....That's interesting. That's real interesting, Inoji." Miiko-san said back to me without any hesitation. "Then I'll be waiting here for you to return."

"Yeah... see you then."

Even if we don't have a connection, let's meet again.

With a wave, I left the room, climbed down the stairs, and left the apartment. The night air cooled down the wound on my cheek. It was the perfect summertime temperature for Kyoto.

The blood didn’t stop flowing.

Red, red, red, red.

My brain felt clear. It felt as if there was nothing that I couldn’t see even in this darkness. I could even differentiate between the cries of the bats in the sky. My nerves were so sensitive that I could even distinguish the feeling of the wind hitting against my skin.

Everything was released.

My everything was released.

Truly....

Exhilarating.

Truly clear.

Truly... a masterpiece.

"Well then, let’s get psyched up and... let's go kill, dismember, gather it, line it all up, and expose it."

I headed out.

All the way up the Kamo River.

Beyond to the other side of the mountain.

To the laboratory of Assistant Professor Kigamine.

CHAPTER 9 —— UNCONSCIOUSNESS (CHANGING CEREMONY OF IDLENESS)

0

He had everything she didn’t have, and he didn’t have anything she had.

1

I collapsed three meters away from the apartment.

It was from anemia.

It was from blood loss.

I was bleeding to death.

Kasugai-san, who was passing by (returning from the convenience store. She was carrying bags full of beer in both hands. A hopeless adult.) helped me. Then she and Houko-chan (Kasugai-san woke her up from her sleep. Good job.) both treated me.

".....Are you an idiot?"

Houko-chan’s first words to me when I woke up were harsh.

"The front of the apartment now looks like a murder scene. The stairs and the hallway too. It’s becoming more and more like a haunted house."

"Sorry...."

"It’s not something that can be resolved by apologizing. Anyway, if you’re going out somewhere, wait until after dawn. The cuts are sharp enough that you don't need stitches; by that time, your body will have recovered."

"Thank you for that... Houko-chan"

"No, no. You’re welcome"

"Ikki. You should also thank me."

"....."

It was too bothersome to try to come up with a retort, so I thanked Kasugai-san.

Once morning came, with the top and bottom of my right cheek covered in gauze sandwiched firmly under my eye, I first searched through my room. Obviously, I wasn’t looking for my passport and insurance card. Now then,

where did I put it again? After leaving it for about a month, I couldn't really remember where I put it... Ah, that's right. It's behind the ceiling.

"Kasugai-san, could you please act as a chair for a bit?"

"……Lewd."

"That's not it."

"So obscene."

"I said that's wrong."

Well, even though Kasugai-san is taller than me, when I think about it, asking a woman to become a chair goes against societal norms. I didn't have enough free time on my hands to preach about the Equal Employment Opportunity Act. So I gave Kasugai-san a ride on my shoulders (again, that's a pretty bad way to put it), and asked her to get the things I wanted from the ceiling.

"Oh. This is....."

"Yes."

It was two knives and a pistol.

One of the knives was for lock opening and wasn't very deadly. So rather than a knife, it was more of a lock-picking tool. The other one, the one I received from Aikawa Jun, was terribly rugged, but surprisingly thin, like a scalpel for medicinal use. It had the appearance of a pocket knife. Then the gun... it was a Jericho 941. There was no need to explain this one. The cartridge was 41AE, and only three bullets were left.

"That's nostalgic."

Kasugai-san said while gazing at them. I see, come to think of it, in last month's case, she was the one who basically stood alone against me while I had these three weapons equipped.

"That's the weapons we had when we both took down that detestable Shadou Kyouichirou, right?"

"Don't fabricate false memories."

After having checked the bullet count and the state of the pistol, I packed it into my gym bag. As for the knives, I put one (the pocket knife) in the

holster on my upper body, and the other (the anti-lock blade), after thinking about it, I decided to put it together with the gun. Since I had rested for a bit, there was no need to worry about anemia anymore, but in the one in a million chance that I were to fall over and stab my hip, that would be a problem.

"Well, I'm off."

"Yeah. By the way, you won't go see Miiko-san?"

"No...."

Miiko-san had been constantly waiting for me since Kasugai-san came back alone from that research lab, so she was lacking in sleep, and after talking to me, she seemed to be sleeping soundly in her room next door.

"If I saw her now, I would look too uncool... More importantly, Kasugai-san. I have a request."

"What?"

"When you first met Rizumu-chan, you took out that business card, didn't you? Do you still have it?"

"I threw it away"

"....."

This person is the worst.

"But I remember what it said. Want me to write it down?"

"As expected from a science person... I'd appreciate it if you did."

"If you want, I can also come along with you."

"No, it'll be easier to move alone."

"I see."

Kasugai-san said indifferently.

"But Ikki. How should I say it... won't it be bad if you went looking like that?"

"? What do you mean?"

"Well I don't think many people would remember a man as plain and dull as you, but it'd be bad if someone near that place remembered you."

"That's true...." It felt like I was being insulted, but you could certainly say that. "Then just in case, it'd be better to disguise myself. A disguise, huh... What should I do? I cut my hair, so I can't crossdress without a wig...."

"Now that I said it, I feel like the gauze on your face is enough. But it'd be a problem if that attracted too much attention. At least change your clothes and put on a hat. Then Ikki, in regards to that, be careful on the way and also when you arrive."

"Understood."

"I count on you to bring back gifts."

"There won't be any."

I put the bag on my back, left the apartment, headed to the parking lot, put on my helmet, and drove off on my Vespa....

Two hours later.

Assistant Professor Kigamine's research lab.

I arrived at the former Saitou Clinic.

".....Huh?"

When I pulled the Vespa into the parking lot, I noticed that the Fiat, the Katana, and the Z were no longer here. Were they removed as *evidence* during the cover up operation? Impossible. That would be cruel. It's fine for the Fiat and the Katana, but the Z is a pretty old model, so there's a possibility that it'll stay in the garage forever. Setting the Katana aside as it's not mine, the Fiat is a problem.

"Hmm...."

As I thought, I went around the building to the courtyard.

It was beautiful.

There was no pool of blood.

Hime-chan's body was also not there.

"....."

I had prepared myself, so it threw me a bit off my rhythm.

It seems that the *disposal*, the cover up, was complete. Since the time I contacted Kunagisa... um, my sense of time is a bit off... but it should've been

the morning before yesterday, so the 48 hours since then was enough for the Kunagisa Syndicate to have finished.

But that's wonderful.

It can disappear without a trace.

"It's as if...."

I was about to say it, but I stopped. There's no way I can say that. It's as if Hime-chan hadn't been alive in the first place. I won't say that kind of thing even if my mouth was split open.

Even the smell of blood had disappeared.

Still.

".....It's nonsense."

Circling the building, I went around to the entrance.

The sliding door was locked.

".....Good grief."

I took out the lock-picking knife from my bag and used it. After about five second, I unlocked it. I opened the door and entered inside. There were shoes. Kuchiha-chan's shoes. Just that.

"Sorry for the intrusion," I said without any meaning. "Well then, I'll just enter."

First... where to?

I think it was the library.

I walked down the hallway while being quiet and alert. However, any sign of human presence here had been completely erased. It had been eradicated. Kuchiha-chan had been living here alone to begin with, so it's unavoidable that there'd be a few signs of her presence left, but for the most part this was the result of the *cleaning*. The door to the laboratory which I had broken that I passed on the way had also been neatly replaced. And then when I arrived at the door of the library... as expected, it was locked. Again, I opened it using the knife.

There was no one inside.

Assistant Professor Kigamine wasn't reading a book.

Assistant Professor Kigamine's shoulder wasn't torn off.

".....There really wasn't any meaning to coming here."

If it's all tidy and cleaned up like this, there won't be any evidence or anything like an on-site inspection. Well, the idea was for it to be a sort of ritual to get inspiration, which might have ended up being ineffective... but this was indeed overkill.

Well, I was the one who asked for the cover up.

But... setting Kuchiha-chan aside, Assistant Professor Kigamine was what Mikoko-chan called a *famous person*. I wonder how the information was falsified? I don't know since I don't read the newspaper or watch TV. Though, it may all be over already.

It's finished.

That's fine, I'll start over and over any number of times.

Continuing from there, I went to the changing room in order to take a look at the shower room. There was no lock here. I opened the door and went inside. The door behind it had a simple lock, but it was the kind that couldn't be used if there was no one inside, so there was no need to worry about it.

As I was about to turn the knob, I hesitated a little.

The girl who won't die.

The girl who won't die.

What does it mean to not die?

Undying, immortal.

At that time, was she truly dead?

That possibility.

If **at that time she was alive**....

If she was alive.

".....It's not something that I can do anything about though, right?"

I shook off that ridiculous delusion and opened the door.

Her body, which should have had it's upper and lower half separated, was....

Not there.

Not anywhere.

".....Well, she's dead."

Kunagisa told me everything about her circumstances without hiding anything. Her corpse was recovered by the Kunagisa Syndicate and will surely continue to be experimented on.

It's pitiable.

No, is it pitiable?

That's... everything that happens after death, everything that happens after you die, all of it is nothing more than our selfish delusions. Did I just think that because I didn't get along with Kuchiha-chan?

But.

Obviously, there weren't enough words between me and Kuchiha-chan for me to feel anything more for her. I should have spoken much more with Kuchiha-chan about various things.

I didn't have much time.

There wasn't any other way to say it.

"....."

I closed the door and left the changing room.

Next is the second floor.

Going back to the hallway, I climbed the stairs up to the second floor.

The hospital room near the stairs.

Niounomiya Rizumu, Niounomiya Izumu.

The Niounomiya siblings.

I opened the door and went inside.

Naturally, it was completely clean inside.

There was no beheaded corpse with a hole in its chest.

"I'm beaten...."

Was there no point in coming all this way?

I left the room and went to the hospital room next door. In other words, the room where Hime-chan and I had spent a night in. Nobody was killed in this room, so you could say that there was no reason to see it.

When I entered inside, of course, it was as we left it.

I couldn't tell if it was cleaned or not... Ah, no, it seems it was cleaned. The bed was back as it was. It didn't have the shape of Hime-chan made by a futon inside a futon, it was cleanly made. A clean white sheet was spread out without even one wrinkle.

".....Hmm?"

Which reminds me... **that**, what was that?

When I woke up, I mistook *that* for Hime-chan. It's clear that at that point, Hime-chan was no longer in the room. However... however, what about when I came back to my room at night? At that time, was it Hime-chan that I saw? If you asked me whether she was deep inside the futon, I wouldn't know how to answer. But even if I didn't see her, there's no guarantee that Hime-chan wasn't there at the time.....

"Guarantee, huh....."

I laid down on the bed.

I closed my eyes for a moment and thought.

Or rather, it was closer to remembering than to thinking.

"Why did Hime-chan do that? Maybe it wasn't Hime-chan... and another person did it... so that I wouldn't notice?"

But why?

For someone to do something that flashy just to **hide it from me**... More than not understanding the meaning behind it, it was just eerie.

That was one of the things that was on my mind.

But there was also one more.

Obviously, it was something even more out of place in comparison to the others.

Unnatural, supernatural.

"**At that time, that cannibal... which person was it**?"

In the middle of the night, after taking a shower and talking with Assistant Professor Kigamine, we passed each other by the stairs. Was that actually Izumu-kun, Rizumu-chan, or... **was it neither of them**?

It seemed empty.

Like zero.

"But... they didn't say anything about having a third personality. Neither Rizumu-chan nor Izumu-kun."

No, wait.

Having a third one that no one knows about, would that be unthinkable? After all, Rizumu-chan perceived *the person* that is Izumu-kun as *someone else*. By the same logic, that would mean that if there was a third person... if there was a third person that neither Rizumu-chan or Izumu-kun knew about, then that wouldn't be weird, right?

".....Hmm"

.....That was just an idea, but was it an unlikely one? If you thought that there was someone with two personalities, but it turned out to be someone with three personalities. The existence of a third personality that no one knows about, setting the *great detective* aside, would that not work out to be as much of a threat as the *professional killer*?

Wouldn't that be a useful trick?

No... Even then, there's still Shiogi-chan's information. That Shiogi-chan of a thousand forms who had fought a thousand battles, it's hard to think that she'd be fooled by a trick of that level... Something like fooling your allies before your enemies, in regards to that girl, that would be like preaching philosophy to Confucius.

I mean, that third personality, let's name him Hizumu-kun, if he existed, what would that change? That wouldn't change anything, would it? No matter how many personalities you have, in the end, there's only one body, and it can only do one thing. It's not like it had four or six arms. The trick of having multiple personalities and expanding them might be good for the *professional killer*, but for the case in itself, there doesn't seem to be much point in thinking about it.

That means I'm at a loss....

Suddenly, I reached a dead end.

".....Before Aikawa-san finds out... she said I only had three days... um... it's a bit confusing from when it's three days, but I guess that would be the day after tomorrow."

If possible, I'd like to get this over with before that.

To tell the truth, the best idea would be for me to contact her... but to be honest, I don't think I'd be able to face her. But after subtracting that sense of self-preservation from the equation, it doesn't mean that absolutely nothing was left. Hypothetically, if I made Aikawa-san show up, then at once, thoroughly and completely, without leaving a single blade of grass, this case *would be concluded*.

I want to avoid that.

I at least want to do something.

Maybe that's just ego.

I don't know what Hime-chan wishes for. Wanting to know what a dead person is thinking, that would be ego. Furthermore, using a dead person as an excuse is even worse. Ego is not good.

It's not good, but.

"I want to do whatever I can. Hmm, those words smell a lot like excuses....."

And.

I heard a sound then.

Without raising myself up from the bed, all at once, a signal ran through my body. That sound... what was it? Was it the sound of the front door opening? I worked my over-sensitive nerves to their maximum. The sound. The sound. Locate the sound, focus.

Kishi..... kishi..... kishi..... kishi..... kishi.....

The hallway... is it walking though it? The sound stopped. As I thought that, I heard the sound of a sliding door opening. There was no sound of it closing, and the sound of a door being opened somewhere continued at an interval.

.....Is it inspecting the rooms?

A person from the Kunagisa Syndicate? Impossible. No matter how you look at it, all of the cleaning should have been completely finished. And I reported to Kunagisa before coming here. If there was any movement, then Kunagisa would have told me at that time.

Kishi-

I heard a sound of someone stepping on the stairs. *Kishi- kishi- kishi- kishi-*, the sound continued. It was coming up to the second floor. At that point, as one would expect, I rose up and got off the bed. I took out the knife from its holster.

The sound of the neighbouring door opening.

Is it checking in order?

The sound of it closing.

Next... it'll come here.

I readied my knife. I didn't have the time to draw my gun.

"....."

I waited for the door to open.

Then.

"----Pon"

It opened.

Standing there was the fox-masked man.

A fox mask and white clothes.

"You... have we met somewhere?" The fox-masked man twisted his head vaguely. "Hmm. No, I see. The vespa outside... I thought I had seen it somewhere. Now that I think about it, it has the same license plate."

".....You."

"'You,' hmm."

The fox-masked man shifted his mask and revealed his true face. His face closely resembled that of a certain person I knew. With that face and those eyes, he looked at me.

"For our ties to reunite in a place like this, very fascinating. Don't you think so?"

"Ah, no. I--"

"For now, put down that dangerous thing."

"Ah. Yes....."

"Kukkukku."

The fox-masked man.

Laughed as if he were committing a crime.

2

After moving from the hospital room to the waiting room, the fox-masked man and I sat down on the cushions across the table from each other. I made some tea in the kitchen and served it. The fox-masked man took his mask off and sipped his tea.

"Rizumu and Izumu didn't come home, you see."

"Oh... now that you mention it... they said that they were currently in your care."

"I'm not really from Kyoto either. It was just part of my roots... and I had asked Rizumu to do a job for me. Regarding *here*, I had her investigate the research that Kigamine... the assistant professor was conducting in this place."

"....."

"And she didn't come back. That probably means that something happened *here*, so I went to see."

"With that Porsche, right?"

"Yeah. I'm not particular about it, but it's an old favorite."

"Um... Mr. Fox, you knew about Izumu-kun, right? *Rizumu* of the Niounomiya and *Izumu* of the Niounomiya... about the front and back union theory."

"'Front and back union theory.' Hmm. That's a nice expression. It seems you're familiar with it," the fox-masked man said. "Well, roughly, yes. If you're asking whether I know it or not, then I know it. Otherwise, I wouldn't *keep* someone like that."

"....."

"Originally, I didn't want to come to such a rural area, but it seems like there was some kind of cover-up. From the fact that Rizumu came here and vanished. In that case, there's no use in talking about it **from afar**. That's why I came here, as you can see, but... earlier you said 'they said,' right?"

"....."

"You seem to know something."

The fox-masked man said with a confident tone.

"Tell me."

".....Something... even if you say that."

It's strange.

Even though the Kunagisa Syndicate did a cover-up... even if they were still in the middle of it, it's strange for this man to appear like this on the scene. I've been thinking about this since a moment ago. To begin with, a cover-up operation is meant to make it feel like there wasn't a cover-up, so how did the fox-masked man notice it?

I wonder how.

It's strange.

It's unnatural.

It's impossible.

If there were a possibility... it would mean that this man is located outside of the political power of the Kunagisa Syndicate....

That kind of speculation made me nervous.

Watch out, don't let your guard down.

And at the same time.

At the same time, it made me think that **I shouldn't let this slip**.

There might be some clue.

This man was the employer of the Niounomiya siblings.

"Well... when you sent Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun here, I was also there. For an aptitude test for a part-time job....."

"Hmm. I see. And so?"

"Before I talk about that, one thing." The fox-masked man urged me to continue, but I carefully opened my mouth. "Do you mind if I told you about some speculation that came to mind?"

"Let's hear it."

"You are... Saitou-san, the former head of this place when it was a clinic, is that right?"

"...Ho." The fox-masked man put back on the mask he had set aside. "Did you hear that from **those two**? Let's hear what makes you think that."

"It's close to guesswork... I just guessed it from Assistant Professor Kigamine's and Kuchiha-chan's story, and also from Izumu-kun's story. Also, the reaction you had when you heard Assistant Professor Kigamine's name last time... and finally, the orders you issued to Rizumu-kun and Izumu-chan. What was hidden behind 'investigate this lab' and 'kill Kigamine Yaku and Madoka Kuchiha.' That's about all of the ingredients for that deduction."

"I swear, every one of them has a loose tongue....." The fox-masked man said as if he was fed up. "Especially the Niounomiya siblings. They were useful, but... they were both too high energy. However, there's also those that are too cool... especially if the cool side is just a thin mask that's hiding a hot nature on the inside... Now that I think about it, Junya was a good example of that."

"Junya?"

"Hmm. No, sorry, it's the name of an old friend. That person was quite gloomy, but also strangely passionate. Really, I couldn't handle him... Hmm. Well, you should put your heart into it as well. Anyway, it's just that it's easier to use guys that are easy to follow. Of course, as an absolute condition, they need to be somewhat clever or else they'd just be a problem. You can't use an idiot."

"....."

"By the way, that question you asked earlier... I can only answer yes to half of it. Saying no would also only be half correct. That's because I'm truly that *Saitou-san*.

"Eh....."

"You're surprised, huh"

Shrugging his shoulders, the fox-masked man made a jest-like gesture.

Then continuing, he turned and looked around.

"This place hasn't changed... it's as if the flow of time has stopped. Nothing has changed from twenty years ago."

"Twenty years....."

That's probably the result of Kuchiha-chan's feelings.

She had taken care of this place for the past two decades. Letting this place remain stagnant, just like her body.

For what purpose?

It's surely...

"I was nearly twenty years old at that time. I was a professor in some impressive university... it was such a colorful job that it makes me laugh. Like a star attraction."

"....."

I know of someone who had received a doctorate at the elementary school stage, so I'm not that surprised by a twenty year old professor at this point. However, this man went on to become *Saitou*... Assistant Professor Kigamine's and also Kuchiha-chan's *mentor*. I hadn't considered that at all. It was completely unexpected.

Suddenly, I lost my words.

Meanwhile, the fox-masked man continued eloquently.

"For me, being a professor was more of a side job, and the clinic I opened here was going to be my main job... but society's assessment of that was lukewarm. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations couldn't be avoided no matter where I went. Setting that aside, Kigamine...Yaku. And Madoka Kuchiha. That's nostalgic... until you made me hear that name again last time, I had completely forgotten about them. I didn't think they were still holed up in this place *continuing after me*."

".....Those two, they were waiting for you."

Even though they didn't say it.

Even then, they were waiting for him.

For someone. For something.

Madly. Lovingly.

"There's nothing I could've done. I had completely forgotten about them," the fox-masked man said candidly. "Well, there's also something wrong with me... I should have remembered with just 'Kyoto.' Now that I think about it, the source of who I am now was that *girl who cannot die*... Humans can forget where they came from. That's a surprise."

".....Setting aside the fact you had forgotten," I said. "If you're Saitou-san, then all the more, why try to kill those two? Why do that... why did you employ Izumu-kun?"

"That's a misunderstanding, a misleading statement. I didn't really try to kill them... because it's like they were already dead twenty years ago. If they had failed to die, then it was just to finish them... or at least I was asking for that kind of nuance... I said it earlier, didn't I? I'm cleaning up after the things from when I was still young and inexperienced. The responsibility for having given them hope... I need to take it. Well, saying such things to Izumu won't get through to him. That guy only listens to about half of half of half of what anyone is saying."

".....Izumu-kun"

"That's why he needs Rizumu. That Izumu, it's already too late for any sort of conventional weapon to stop his mayhem. It's not one against a thousand. If you know how to use him, he's a berserker who could win a war alone. Did you hear about why both of his arms are restrained?"

"Um... if he doesn't do that, he won't be able to control himself. I heard something like that, but...."

"Niounomiya Izumu, the *Man Eater*. He has his family's treasured sword, a one-hit sure kill technique called *Eating One*... it's an inhuman technique where he uses the arms he normally keeps sealed. Honestly, even when I saw it used in front of me, I was shaken. You could say he's the greatest masterpiece out of all of the Niounomiya's history... although, that would be in a few years, however. To be called the greatest masterpiece, he still lacks some history and achievements... furthermore, even then, Rizumu's support is essential."

"Rizumu-chan... her body... it's weird to put it like this, but when she becomes like that, isn't it dangerous for her? You said support, but she has no fighting ability on her side, does she?"

".....You don't understand. What I find to be scarier is Rizumu rather than Izumu. Killing such a baby-like kid... such a weak kid. To *kill* such a cute and small kid like that is more unbearable than you think. The guilt of killing a weakling that's not even an enemy, killing something that has the form of a human, you know what I mean, right? In reality, even you, unintentionally, probably 'out of character,' saved Rizumu-chan."

"....."

"It's the strength of weakness... being strong is weak and being weak is strong. Didn't Izumu say something like that? It's not like she didn't have any skill as a detective, but... more accurately, Rizumu was Izumu's **defensive form**. Both in a physical sense... and also in a psychological sense."

".....But then, Rizumu-chan... she was too pitiful. No, it might be weird to say pitiful for an artificially created personality, but....."

"Pitiful, huh... You're a relatively quick witted fellow, but you don't seem to understand the most important point....." The fox-masked man's tone was one of ridiculing me for my misunderstanding. "In regards to the Niounomiya siblings, the Niounomiya siblings' assassination technique, Izumu and Rizumu, which do you think is the *back* and which do you think is the *master*?"

"That's... Izumu-kun, right?"

"You fool."

I was flatly rejected with a good amount of emotion.

The fox-masked man laughed, "Kukkukku."

"Even though Izumu and Rizumu are artificially created personalities that were deliberately divided into strength and weakness respectively, ultimately, they only have a very short amount of time where they act as a killer. They're not serial killers, so they don't work around the clock spending 24 hours a day killing people. In other words, the time that the *Man Eater*

spends on the surface is only an hour. Based on the view of the general public, that's a very small amount of time. The *shadow* is rather ***at the back***, on Izumu's side."

"....."

"For the Niounomiya siblings, the time spent as the *Carnival* is far greater. I'm not saying that time is everything, but... even though we're talking about front and back, it's the same for them."

".....A pair as one."

"One as a pair. The Niounomiya siblings."

Supporting each other...

Their relationship is too one-sided.

That's what I thought.

But that's not it.

What Rizumu-chan was for Izumu-kun.

What Izumu-kun was for Rizumu-chan.

It's not a matter of thinking.

It's something beyond logic.

I was made to think a little.

The fox-masked man went "Hmm," adding in a break.

"The conversation has strayed. Let's go back."

".....Yeah... that's right. Then let me ask you a question, you said that Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan *failed to die*, what did you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. It's not really something I want to explain to an outsider... well, I guess you're not that much of an outsider. Asking only what I want to ask would be unreasonable." The fox-masked man prefaced with that, and then continued. "You see, I should have **killed** them twenty years ago... no, that's wrong. From the world's perspective, saying I *threw them away* would be more accurate---I *abandoned them*. Right, those are the words... that's the correct answer. *I abandoned those two*."

".....I still don't understand."

"*Researching not dying*. That was originally my subject... I'm sure you heard it from Kuchiha, but it was my subject. Let's see, it'll be a bit of an embarrassing story, but... when I was about twenty years old. In other words, when I was about your age."

"I'm nineteen and a half."

"'I'm nineteen and a half.' Hmm. Then that's exactly it... The me at that time really, really *didn't want to die*. If I were to put it plainly, I wanted to live a long life."

".....Oh....."

I thought that was something everyone wanted, but now that I think about it, being possessed by that kind of thing at the age of twenty or so is surprisingly rare. It's not just me, young and immature people are quite nihilistic. Finding meaning in a long life happens later once you've matured a bit.

"I tried to calculate it once. Everything that I held an interest in, how much time was needed to know all of it without leaving anything. What came out was an astronomically large number. At the very least, with the human age limit of 120 years, it wasn't enough. That was where I ended up with the speed of my thinking and computational ability. It was quite a stupid calculation."

"Huh....."

"It's not that I was afraid to die, though. I was afraid of not having enough time to live. Ending without knowing what I wanted to know. Dying while having things I didn't know, that would've been unacceptable."

"So... *researching not dying*, huh."

"Meeting Kuchiha was what you would call a *coincidence*. Just a coincidence. Well, let's just say that there was someone *raising* Kuchiha-chan before me."

".....A connection between researchers, is that it?"

"No. Before that, Kuchiha-chan was more of a pet of a nouveau riche. By the way, it seems that you've met Kuchiha. How was she? How old did she appear?"

"Seventeen... seventeen or eighteen. About that."

"Then it's the same as me," the fox-masked man said. "When I also first met her, Kuchiha was about that age in physical appearance. If you can't believe it, then inside the diagnosis room... well, it's now the *laboratory*, try to go there. There should be some pictures left... from twenty years ago."

"Then... being a pet."

"**It has that meaning**. A meaning just as hellish and dark as what you're imagining. No matter what, someone who can't die will always be treated as some sort of strange creature. Though, she didn't receive a monstrous treatment, so she was still on the human path, I guess... even just staying alive with no physical defects is paradise. Buying her cost me quite a lot, you know. It seems they had an attachment towards Kuchiha... no matter the form, being loved may not be a bad thing, but thanks to that the price went up by a lot. I had to use all of the wealth that I had saved up."

"....."

It was a story that didn't concern itself with human rights or ethics.

The problem being what it was, I guess there was nothing that could be done.

"And... for about six month, I was with Kuchiha... while being helped by a supporter named Kigamine... hmm. Kigamine, huh. For some reason we got along well... if she had any talent, I'm sure we could have walked together... I never thought that she was continuing by herself. Incompetence is humanity's tragedy."

"Why did you stop... the research on Kuchiha-chan?"

"Because I realized that it was futile," the fox-masked man said flatly. "It was an anomaly that happens only once in an era. She herself only had about 60 years of memory, but... well, that seemed to be the limit of her. Rather than capacity, it's a simple memory limit. Even you don't remember the memories of when you were a kid ten years ago. It's that kind of thing... Kuchiha had about 800 years. From what I could find out with hypnotherapy, she lived for about 800 years. Even just that should be a highly valued *phenomenon,* but...

Kukkukku, despite having lived 800 years, she had quite a vulgar personality. Though, whether it be 800 years or 1000 years, if just living made you enlightened, then no one would meditate. You also seem to have a bias on her outward appearance... hmm. 800 years. It should be a highly valued *phenomenon*, but her existence will definitely not occur again. To begin with, Kuchiha had abilities close to a human, but... her body was health itself. It had a high ability to build immunity, and her regenerative abilities were out of the norm. However, she lacked reproductive capabilities. In other words, she couldn't leave any descendants. It would be different if we could clone humans, but... even then, it would require precise technology to exactly copy Kuchiha's abnormal cells. In short, her *deathless body* couldn't be applied towards anything else."

".....That's why you abandoned them"

"I didn't say that to them, though. Maybe they didn't even know they'd been abandoned. But I didn't give up on my goal because of that... I just moved on to the next stage. But that next stage was also a failure... it wasn't just a failure, it was a true disaster. I told you that before. Now I'm on the next... of the next of the next stage. **That was why I employed Rizumu to search for Zerozaki**... but it seems that was also a misfire. Furthermore, this case should have been just a simple settlement, but for some reason Rizumu and Izumu didn't come back, so I was wondering what I should do."

"....."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki

He was... at that stage?

"Well, it's a good story for me to think about, but... I find it a little pitiable that those two were still continuing. I might be a piece of garbage, but even I have some compassion. How should I put it... it's like the feeling you get when you see a computer trying to calculate the decimals of pi... or the tragedy of the waterfowl... or like a ghost trying to draw water with a dipper without a bottom... or like a satellite eternally revolving around Earth... that kind of image. Anyway, whether I requested it or not... nothing would change. For the

people obeying *the Story*, they would either die at a different point or live a life no different from a corpse. Either they die or they don't. So I figured it'd be better to die. I thought that it was mercy. It's what you'd call an assisted suicide, I guess. To be honest, a part of me also wanted to erase my past."

"Following *the Story*, huh. Just for that reason, you tried to kill two people?"

"I wonder, for what reason can I kill two people? If it becomes 200 million people, then can I kill them without holding up a sign about justice or peace? It's the same thing, so for me, it's sufficient." The fox-masked man did not show any guilt. "Furthermore, one of them *wasn't a person.*"

".....Right"

"Ho. I was prepared for at least one moral complaint, but you're surprisingly calm."

"It seems useless to say it to you. Also....."

"***Also, things didn't go as I planned.***"

The fox-masked man pointed at me.

"My explanation should be enough with that. If I went too much into the details, it would violate their privacy... Besides, it's an old story. It's from twenty years ago, so there are surely some mistakes in my memory. There's nothing less interesting than listening to the misremembering of a personal story. Now, I'd like to hear about the situation from your side. What exactly happened to Izumu and Rizumu, tell me."

"I understand....." I said. "But regarding that, I also... don't want to mix up a personal story, so it'll be a broad outline. Is that fine?"

"I don't mind. I also don't want to listen to boring stories."

"Then I'll tell you."

I explained to the fox-masked man the whole story from the evening of the 15th to the early morning of the 16th. Because the fox-masked man is outside the Kunagisa Syndicate's cover-up operation, he couldn't have known what happened without employing someone like Chii-kun... Besides interjecting from time to time, he listened to my story. It was impossible for

me to read the expression he had under his mask, but to the very end, it felt like he was very intrigued. There was no obligation for me to tell him that I (well, the Kunagisa Syndicate) was the one to do the cover-up, so I mixed in a suitable lie for that part.

"Hmm."

After having heard the whole story, the fox-masked man said.

"I see... Killed twice, the Niounomiya siblings, right."

He mumbled while appearing to be completely serene. There was no air of mourning, it was just as if he was confirming the facts.

".....Is it fine if I take a few minutes to ask some more questions? There were a couple of points in your story that were critically lacking in information."

"If it's only a few, it doesn't bother me."

"That Yukariki Ichihime... I know that name. If I remember correctly, she was also the existence called *Signal Yellow* or something like that."

"No, I don't know if she was called something like that... We didn't have that close of a relationship."

"'We didn't have that close of a relationship.' Then how about I put it like this... that Yukariki Ichihime, didn't she pair up with Shisei Yuma, the existence known as *Zig Zag*?"

".....So you know about it."

It's not that surprising that he knows about Sumiyuri Academy since he has employed one of the professional killers of the Niounomiya. However, even Izumu the *Man Eater* didn't arrive at that point just from hearing the name Yukariki Ichihime....

"I knew it. Then that girl, she uses *string techniques*... and also with skill equal to that of *Zig Zag*...."

".....What about it?"

"No, I'm just surprised at how many people you knew. It's not just Kigamine and Kuchiha, you even knew *Zig Zag*'s disciple."

The fox-masked man paused as if building suspense, then said.

"To call it a coincidence... it'd be too much."

".....It is a coincidence. That kind of thing."

"Hmm. I wonder. You may think that you're responsible for the death of Yukariki Ichihime, but that's wrong. The fact that she died here means that she would have died somewhere else...taking the name of *Signal Yellow*. Even if she didn't die here, sooner or later she would have suffered from something holding the same meaning as 'death' for you. What you should grieve about Yukariki Ichihime's death is that you involved yourself with it."

"That's....."

Can I deny it?

What the fox-masked man just said to me was the same as what I had asked Izumu-kun to do. That if he was to kill Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, he should do it in a place I didn't know and had nothing to do with me... Asking him to **just not kill them in front of me**... the meaning of that isn't that different from what he said, is it?

For example, if Hime-chan had died in a car accident or from illness, would I have gone so far?

But.

Such an assumption.

What is the meaning of such regret?

"There is no meaning... no meaning. The only thing that has meaning is the process of accumulating results. In other words, the Story, the tale. It's the same for Kigamine and Kuchiha. In this part of the Story, regardless of whether they had died or not, it would've been the same as if they had died anyway because that's how the plot was written."

"Story, huh? You said something like that last time too....."

"It seems that you're still looking lightly on the existence of the Story. Well, it's fine even if you don't believe me... but, for example, based on the story I heard earlier, that wasn't the first time you had met Izumu. It seems

you had first met him somewhere else... Ah, that's my second question. Where did you meet Izumu for the first time?"

".....Um, I found him earlier at night... when he had collapsed."

"I see. Right, right, it's probably that. Hey, Onii-san. That too... don't you think it's too much to be a coincidence? That just before you had saved Izumu who had collapsed, you saved Rizumu who had also collapsed."

"No... that's not it. The one who saved Rizumu-chan was, er, a biologist who was in the middle of going home."

"Ah, Kasugai Kasuga, right? That's another famous person... though, that one's a famous *weirdo*. It doesn't matter. If Kasugai Kasuga hadn't picked her up, then you would have. Even if you didn't pick her up, some friend of yours would have and you would have come to know her. Otherwise..."

"The story wouldn't progress."

The fox-masked man asserted.

"....."

"Ah, and also... it's correct to say that Rizumu had collapsed, but Izumu hadn't, he was *hunting*"

".....Hunting?"

"He's become too used to being a professional killer. That straitjacket was a restraint that was imposed on him so that he wouldn't overdo it during his *hunting*. It's not unusual for it to be common among the inhabitants of that world... especially in his case since he made Rizumu carry all of his *weakness*. If he doesn't hunt regularly, if he doesn't *devour people* daily, he won't be able to keep his personality stable."

"....."

The time of massacre is one hour a day .

.....I guess that wasn't entirely a joke.

"Let's just say that he was a *workaholic* who got carried too far by momentum and became *a murder addict*. It was for the best that I picked him

up from the Ninomiya Massacre Magic Group when they couldn't handle him."

"Hah....."

It's like I was hearing a story from another world again.

Who exactly is this fox-masked man....

Which world is he a resident of?

"Focus more on the fact that you were chosen as the prey of that *hunt*... What do you think about that? I think it's part of the Story, but you don't seem to think that. Don't you get it... it's not a matter of probability."

"Not a matter of probability?"

"It's not about probability at all. I told you before, it's Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative. You may think that meeting me here, in this place, is just a coincidence, **but it's not**. At this point in time, you already possess a shallow connection with Kigamine and Kuchiha, and the reason why Kigamine was interested in you was also related to me. Between you and me, there's Niounomiya Rizumu, Niounomiya Izumu, Kigamine Yaku, and Madoka Kuchiha which exist as branches to a flowchart. With that, it would've been weirder if we didn't meet. **No matter how**, in the end, you and I would have a link."

"A link...?"

"To put it strongly, it's the uncertainty principle. **Not one of them is more correct... in this world, everything is correct**. It breaks the world and humans down to the quantum level, integrates it, differentiates it, interprets it, and ultimately proves it. That's the closest I can come to expressing my goal at the moment, that's the limit of how much I can express in words. Yes, no matter how it happens, everything will eventually converge towards a single, predetermined point. Even if the flowchart may branch out infinitely, in the end everything will converge on a single point. That final point---I call it the Dying Epilogue"

"....."

"I want to see it"

The tone of the fox-masked man.

It wasn't at all as if he was talking about a dream. It was a serious tone that didn't allow for rebuttal.

".....For me, it's a worthless story....." After thinking about it for a bit, I expressed my feelings honestly. "Even if that was the case... Even if what you're saying is true, there's no room for me to enter into that story."

"'There's no room for me to enter.' Hmm. Even if you don't say it, it's still a difficult problem for me... It's fundamentally contradictory to be an observer in this world of quantum mechanics."

".....Are your questions over?"

"Mm... Oh, yes. Only those two points piqued my interest." The fox-masked man nodded. "Though, my second question was just out of curiosity and the one that really mattered was the first one, the one concerning Signal Yellow... Hmm. I see... So that's what happened. Well, it's not an incomprehensible story. The caged bird won't be satisfied just by jumping forever. Hmm, that feeling... well, it's not like I don't understand it."

".....What?"

"No. Thank you, I'll give you my thanks. I feel much better now. I'll be going home... You should do the same too. Even if you stay here, you won't gain anything. This place.....

is already finished.

It no longer has any connection to the Story."

".....But"

"First of all, you already checked yourself, right? I don't know who did it, but a cover-up means that there won't be any trace of what happened left."

"But... aren't you curious? About how the result of the *massacre* you requested became so messed up? Even if not for that, then the connection you had with Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun...."

"That was the case earlier. That's why I came here."

The fox-masked man said.

"But that's all over now."

"What was unclear has been cleared to an overwhelming degree."

".....Eh?"

"Honestly, it kind of hurts. Among the *Thirteen Stairs*, Izumu and Rizumu served me the most. What do you call this feeling, again? ....Attachment, yes, attachment. Longing, yes, longing. In that sense, it's not like there aren't some things to think about, but there's nothing that can be done about something that has already ended. All I can do is clap my hands to make as much noise as possible and then leave my seat in silence. Silence... Kukkukku, just silence. It seems that both Rizumu and Izumu desire that from me... It's been a long relationship, so I'll at least give them that as a parting gift."

"Then, that means, Mr. Fox, in other words....."

"Yeah... Though, unlike Rizumu, I'm not a great detective or some weird anomaly. It's not like I've come up with an answer with just reasoning or anything. Nevertheless...." The fox-masked man said, choosing his words. "**If I put together the information I knew in advance with what I heard in your story, I can roughly imagine the gist of what happened.**"

"The gist, you say....."

"Yes, **the gist**. I still don't know **what** did the cover-up. Hmm. I can imagine the general image... I can imagine it exactly. When it's this beautifully clean, proof and evidence mean nothing. Furthermore, everything you said wasn't necessarily true, and there's also still the possibility that the information I knew beforehand was false... Well, I just wanted to say that last part as a way of self-concealment. In this world, there are countless fools who don't get self-concealment, but from what I saw, you don't seem to be one of them. In short, it's just irresponsible speculation, though, there's probably no error." The fox-masked man said that much and stood up from the cushion. "That said, I can't really tell it to you. There are

certain things you shouldn't tell someone just because they want you to, and certain things you shouldn't answer just because they asked you to. At the very least, you shouldn't blurt out other people's secrets. You understand that at least, right? Unlike the others, I have a tight mouth."

"....."

That I understood.

I understood it enough to understand it too much.

"But it's not the type of question that can't be answered by thinking. That's why, Onii-san, instead of thinking here, I think it'd be much better for you to think at home. If you stay in this finished place, you'll just get depressed. What would you be doing now if I hadn't come along?"

"What I was going to do... you say? For starters," I looked at my gym bag. "I was thinking about going to the address written on the business card I got when I first met Rizumu-chan...."

If there was a chance.

If there was a chance, I wanted to meet you.

I was thinking about finding something, any sort of information on you, even if it wasn't anything concrete like a place of residence or something like that.

But I won't say that.

If I say that, I'd be admitting it.

That even if I hadn't met the fox-masked man here, eventually, at some time that isn't now, at some place that isn't here, we would have had the same conversation as we had here and now. I would be admitting that.

"That's no use," the fox-masked man said simply. "I'm not saying that that address doesn't exist, but it's just a temporary residence. It's just one of the many hideouts of the Niounomiya siblings. Even if you shamelessly call there 24 hours a day all year long, you'll just get the answering machine."

".....Is that so."

I sighed.

It felt like I was already at a dead end... Aside from having Kunagisa ask Nao-san to let me talk directly to the people who did the *cleaning* if it came to it, I didn't have any other move. Considering this wasn't a case that Kunagisa was involved in, I didn't feel too good about borrowing the Kunagisa Syndicate's help, but if I don't have any other move... then is it okay? If what the fox-masked man said was true, this might not be a case that can be solved with that kind of effort or that kind of work.

Inspiration.

A leap in the way of thinking.

Psychological.

What I need is a theory that works on paper.

Methodology over logic.

Magic more abnormal than logic.

What I need is that counterfeit magic.

"...However, that kind of ad hoc idea, that kind of nonsense, is my specialty."

"Is that so. Then it's only a matter of time. If you're the kind of person that can find the answer, then no matter what happens, you'll find it someday."

"Yes... but even if you say that I'll find it someday, I only have about two days left. That's the deadline I've set for myself."

"If it's something you decided yourself, then you'll need to do your best. I also had one of my worries disappear, so now I'll be able to move on to the next stage with some peace of mind... I don't know what to do, I haven't found my footing yet. I don't think the methodology of this approach is wrong, but... either way, if I don't have the key, the door won't open... Maybe instead of the key, it's the knob that doesn't exist in this case....."

"....."

The next stage.

Stage.

Point.

Should I ask or not?

I hesitated, but if I missed this opportunity, I wouldn't have another chance, so I decided to ask.

".....The man you had Rizumu-chan investigate, *Zerozaki Hitoshiki*... listening to what you said earlier, it doesn't seem like you were looking for him just out of curiosity. It seems there was a firm objective... Last time you just said 'I wanted to get involved.....'"

"You're strangely obsessed with that"

The fox-masked man seemed a little suspicious. Certainly, my obsession with *Zerozaki Hitoshiki* was, from his perspective, abnormal, if not bizarre.

"Well it's fine... No, that's correct. Without any lie, it was just that. I **just wanted to get involved** with that person called Zerozaki Hitoshiki. I only learned about Zerozaki Hitoshiki recently. Hmm, it got my interest... Let me explain a little." The fox-masked man sat back down on the cushion. "Under the organization that the Niounomiya siblings came from, the Massacre Magic Group, the Nionomiya Troupe, there are several organizations with similar structures... one of them is the *Sawarabi.*"

"Yeah....."

Sawarabi.

The meaning probably isn't "a layer of colors."

If I remember correctly, in the Ten Uji Chapters in the Tale of Genji... the one where Nakagimi goes to Tokyo, was called *Sawarabi*[6]. To be honest, I don't really remember.

"I heard from Izumu that the *Sawarabi* had a head-on battle with Zerozaki. It was just something that made my antenna react... Even more than *Cloud Smeared in Purple* or *Mind Render*, it was the name of Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The other day, Rizumu told me about the serial killings Zerozaki Hitoshiki had committed in Kyoto. More precisely, about the head-on battle that

[6] The Ten Uji Chapters refer to the last ten chapters of the Tale of Genji. The chapter named Sawarabi is the 48th one.

happened just before that. And then, with Rizumu's help, I looked into the details here and there and found that he has a really interesting destiny. Rather than interesting... he possesses a destructive destiny."

"....You mentioned that the other day."

The demon child who was born from the incetuous union of two Zerozaki.

The purest among the purest of serial killers.

"Yeah. I thought that perhaps this being called Zerozaki Hitoshik could be the first step in observing the story without participating in it."

"....."

"I first got that idea from Kuchiha. She told you, right? That Kigamine hired you for that kind of reason... 'I don't affect anyone,' she said something like that, didn't she? If we go back, that was originally my line."

"So... you tried to give an explanation for her *deathless body* there."

"Yeah. Well, saying that it had no effect was a bit of an over exaggeration... Kigamine might have explained it, but the human body, or rather, the animal body is programmed to die. Without searching for a way to reprogram that, immortality is impossible. It's not like even you have never thought about why living things die in the first place, either."

".....It's about the diversity of species, right? In other words, the death of an individual doesn't mean the death of the collective... that's the meaning."

We commonly say things like "this year's cold was quite bad," but from a biological standpoint, that's true for every year. Every year, viruses and bacteria transform and evolve into something more powerful, something that humans are not yet immune to. If you don't look at human beings as individuals but instead arrange them as a group... there's no such thing as "death."

Continuing to live... forever.

"It might be easier to understand if we used plants as an example. Rather than counting them one by one, it's more accurate to count them by colony. In other words, in regards to Kuchiha, it would be more accurate to count her as something *other than human.*"

"Not a person... is that it?"

"Yes. Not a person, not an animal, not an organism, so that's why she can't die. If there was a time where she were to die, it would only be at the moment of *extinction.*"

Extinction.

Extinction... has occurred.

Because Kuchiha-chan is dead.

"Even if you say grand things like it's a *deathless body*, it's not like it really can't die... If you destroy its stomach, then it'll die normally. The point is that she was of a different species from humanity." The fox-masked man said in a disillusioned way. "The paradox between growth and evolution, was it? Maybe she was an extraterrestrial life form."

"Is that possible?"

"I won't say that it's impossible. However, my interpretation is a bit more fantastical... **I think she might have been someone from outside of the Story**. She might have been a character that wasn't supposed to appear. That would mean that a character that wasn't meant to be part of the story had managed to slip in. Hmm. It's a bit like having a character from a science fiction novel in a mystery novel... If I put it like that, it might be easier to understand. In short, that's what I mean. Kuchiha was an unavoidable *bug* who got itself into the program known as the Story, she was a *typo* who infiltrated the novel."

"....."

"Her name... it's probably not inscribed in what I would call the Akashic Records. It's as if she wasn't there from the start. The outside dug into the inside. She wasn't anything special, just lacking."

A contradiction... a misprint.

A failure of God.

She will not die because she wasn't given *death*.

It's not that she won't die.

Death was missing.

That's... that would be like Kuchiha-chan was really dead while still living, wouldn't it? Her words, which were strangely throwaway and self-deprecating, pierced me like a spear, one by one. The words that she said earlier felt *alien*, but had a strange persuasive power.

I see... the worlds we live in are different.

It's not about species or kinds.

It's not the back, the front, the reverse, or the opposite.

It's about a resident from a different world.

Then... there's no way we can analyse it.

Her existence is similar to that fortune teller.

The only choice is to give up on trying to understand.

But there are things to be gained by abandoning understanding. That fortune teller said it... there are sometimes people whose hearts can't be read, whose future can't be read. Kunagisa Tomo was like that for that fortune teller. I thought that it was because her heart was too deep, but in reality that wasn't it, it was because her name wasn't clearly written in the story.....

"Well, since it's statistically impossible for a work of art to be free of all bugs and mistakes... Kuchiha's existence was something inevitable and indispensable to the Story. Maybe there are more people like Kuchiha out there... Being immortal might not have been a bug or an error, but anyway, *that unnecessary existence had to exist as something necessary and indispensable.* It's a paradox that will forever remain unsolved... Obviously, this is just a conceptual discussion, and I have no interest in solving that *deathless body* with reason. It's something that's out of bounds even for me. Maybe she had eaten the flesh of a mermaid...."

Yao Bikuni.

800 years.

"Even you have read Takahashi Rumiko, right?"

"....."

Apparently he likes Shogakukan.

"You seem to have a talent for leaving things you don't understand as they are"

"Well, yeah. That's important, you know. Even if I could figure out the method to *not die*, the next stage that I chose after not being able to replicate it was to use a different method to reach the same goal. To *not die* is to give up. Because even without a *deathless body*, there is a way for me to know everything that I want to know. It's extremely clear and simple--

I just need to read the story.

With Kuchiha's existence, I was convinced that the story exists. **As long as there is a misprint, there is a Story**. That's obvious. That's exceptionally obvious. It's so evident that putting it into words would be a waste of time.

"Reading the Story, is that it?"

That's... an observer.

In the ultimate sense, that's an observer.

"Once you're convinced of the Story's existence, it's natural human emotion to want to read it. It's not a unique feeling. Because achieving that would become one's deepest wish. The key is to separate this way from that way. The strong and the weak, the not so strong and the not so weak, and the good and the good enough will build a monument similar to the Tower of Babel. I'm fine as long as I can observe that pyramid from the sidelines... Something like that"

Kukkukku, the fox-masked man laughed in between.

"Having said that, up to now, I've been repeating that trial and error approach in a variety of unsightly ways... *Zerozaki Hitoshiki* was supposed to be the fourth approach, so that makes it the fourth defeat. For the current me who is lacking Rizumu, searching for his whereabouts would be too difficult. I have no choice but to move on to the next step."

"....For 'the current me?'"

"I thought I told you. I've been expelled from causality, so I can't act openly. Now that Izumu and Rizumu are gone, I'll have to search for new Stairs... There are very few *Stairs* in the first place, so losing two here is a bothersome and strange story... Hmm. Well, this concludes the conversation about Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Have you been satisfied?"

"Yes... that was very helpful."

To be honest, I still didn't understand.

But... there's one thing I do understand.

This man and Zerozaki must not be allowed to cross paths.

I'm certain that it would result in something outrageous.

It's a bit hard to imagine that that human failure had a meaning this active, that a serial killer whose only raison d'etre was to kill had such an ultimate meaning... but still.

I must not let this man meet him.

That much is certain.

.....Thinking about it normally, it's not like I have to be so tremendously worried. People don't meet so easily. In books and movies, if you happen to be walking around aimlessly, you'll end up meeting someone you know or are thinking about **by chance**, but the only time such a phenomenon is accepted as reality is in high school dramas where the range of action is overwhelmingly limited. Once you take a step out into the city, you can't do it anymore. Encountering someone **by chance** on a train, or witnessing **by chance** two people together, those kinds of things are just a fantasy. Chance encounters don't happen that often, and fated encounters are absolutely impossible.

Furthermore, Zerozaki Hitoshiki is dead.

That was the result of Rizumu-chan's investigation.

There's no such thing as meeting or parting with a dead person.

However.

I met Rizumu-chan.

I met Izumu-kun.

I met the fox-masked man.

Chance.

Just by chance.

With probabilities that can only be described as inevitable.

Like a story.

"It seems that Kigamine was doing her best to break down fate on her own, that's why she contacted you... but that too was unnecessary. Trying to carve out your own destiny isn't a mistake or a typo, it's just the usual presumptuousness that humans like so much. She wasn't breaking open her destiny at all. From the start, Kigamine had been searching for **someone like you**... Even before you were offered that part-time job, even before you had been contacted by Kigamine... um, what was it again...? Right, you had already heard about her from Aoii Mikoko. You had already known about Kigamine Yaku. Hmm. At the very least to the extent that you had remembered it, you held an interest in Kigamine. Kigamine forcibly twisted her schedule to set the stage, and whether she contacted you or not... whether you took the job or not, sooner or later, **no matter what you did**, you would have met... and you would have met Kuchiha. Sooner or later, that's the only difference."

I met Assistant Professor Kigamine.

I met Kuchiha-chan.

I met Hime-chan in June.

I met Kasugai-san in July.

I met Aikawa-san in April.

I met Zerozaki in May.

What about Kunagisa? And what about Magokoro?

That... can I say that it was just a coincidence?

That would be... way more unlikely.

"'A rebellion against causality. A revolution against the existent destiny. A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to

come...' I have already passed my immature and romantic period where I could say things like that. Those observing causality, those gazing at destiny, those enjoying the inevitable should leave battle to the slaves. I am a man who has changed my positions and opinions many times, but this is the one thing that won't ever change. I will tell you the purpose that I've held since the moment I've been born...

To make this uninteresting world interesting---

until it's exhausted."

"Interesting, huh?"

"Yes. In that sense, Kigamine's aesthetic sense in regards to choosing you is considerable... You, you're truly interesting. The more I hear about you, the more interesting your existence becomes. It's not like you haven't thought about it, right? The reason why when there were five people and four died, **the only one to survive was you**. Why is that? Is it because you're the killer?"

"Eh, that's----"

"That's wrong! You, you have too much potential to die in a place like that... isn't that right?"

".....You're overestimating me," I answered like always. "As you can see, I'm just a kid."

"Hmm. That part is different from the **old** me... Certainly, it's as Kigamine and Kuchiha said. **You resemble the old me**... not in terms of personality or appearance... but **the soul.**"

"The soul....."

"Yes. The soul of Humanity's Worst."

.....

I couldn't argue against that. I couldn't object.

Far from it, I was about to accept it.

"Ah, so that was it." Like that.

Just barely, I managed to regroup.

"Give me a break... Someone like me is just the weakest. Humanity's Weakest, the Nonsense User"

"Strong is weak and weak is strong, you know. That probably means that your weakness has already turned into strength. Since I said it, there's no mistake. Well, your story is still full of many causes and effects... I still can't predict what will happen from now on. The only advice I can give you would be that you should live every day with fun and enjoyment."

".....That's what I'm the worst at."

"Naturally. It's difficult because it's simple. It's difficult, and therefore it's interesting. What's the fun in participating in a game where you won't feel bad if you fail? There's no meaning in just participating. Winning and gaining joy, failing and gaining humiliation, that's where there is meaning."

Victory and loss, they're just the stepping stones to the *sequel*.

The fox-masked man stood up suddenly.

He seemed to be going home this time.

".....Ah"

I wondered if it was fine like this.

I was suddenly impatient.

Is it fine to let the fox-masked man go home right now?

In the end, it feels like we only talked about *other* things and I've heard nothing about the case. Don't I still have questions to ask? If he has realized the truth of the matter, then if I asked him to tell me... No, there's no meaning to it if I don't figure it out myself. It'd be no good if he just told me.

But even so, if I don't manage to at least catch something like a hint, then won't I just stray further from the truth.....

Something.

Any hint.

".....You look like you want something."

The fox-masked man said.

"No matter how you ask, I can't answer something that I can't answer, but otherwise... I'll answer one more question for you."

"Only one...?"

I was lost. What could I ask? What should I ask? Destiny. Inevitability. Causality. Fate. Kigamine Yaku. Researching not dying. Madoka Kuchiha. A deathless body. Yukariki Ichihime. *Zig Zag*'s disciple. Kasugai Kasuga. Freeloader. The Saitou Clinic. The fox-masked man. The Nonsense User. Shit. Shit. Shit. No matter how much I think and think and think and think, the answer won't come. The best question in this situation, I can't come up with a question like the ones the fox-masked man asked earlier. All I could come up with was vague and unimportant questions.

To be honest, it's not like I don't have a hypothesis.

It's not like I can't explain what happened.

Kunagisa had also said she had a hypothesis. At the very least, from the fox-masked man's reaction, I know that there is a **clear answer**. However... no matter what I do, with just that, it's weak.

It's weak.

In order to break through that weakness, no matter what, there's one prerequisite that I must tear down. But that prerequisite is too strong and tough. It's a castle with an almost absolute, iron wall. It was a hypothesis that felt like it was the kind of escapism that felt equal to falsifying history.

Ah... fuck, I want a smarter brain. I won't ask for something like Aikawa-san or Kunagisa. I don't need that much. What I need is to achieve the greatest result with the least ability, the mind of a *strategist*....

".....Hagihara Shiogi."

I said.

"Hagihara Shiogi... are you familiar with her?"

"Hagihara....."

"Since you know Shisei Yuma and Yukariki Ichihime... maybe you also know that name... that's what I thought."

"More than just knowing her....."

The fox-masked man sounded as if he was taken aback by my carefreeness.

"That girl is none other than the one who turned the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe against the Serial Killer Group, the Zerozaki clan. She's that crazy kid. You also knew someone like that?"

"Yes... well, she's an acquaintance."

"One theory is that at that time, two people were participating on the Zerozaki side: *Mind Render* and *Seamless Bias*... Being stuck in between a pincer attack by those big scissors and that nail bat must have been a hell that I can't even imagine. Even with just half of the rumors I heard from Izumu, the *Strategist*, Hagihara Shiogi... she surpasses my imagination. She's the ultimate monster."

"....."

Shiogi-chan was someone that amazing?

I said some impertinent things.

But....

But if she wasn't at that level, I'd be in trouble.

"So, what about that Hagihara Shiogi?"

"Yes... Um, I heard a story that Shiogi-chan went up against the Niounomiya... At that time, Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan, did the *Cannibal* Niounomiya siblings clash with Shiogi-chan?"

"They didn't."

It was an immediate answer.

"If the rumors are true, then Izumu's combat skills can't compare against Hagihara Shiogi. He would be led around by the nose and that would be his downfall... Even Rizumu's incredible *weakness* probably won't do anything against the *Strategist*. I'll say this just in case, but that doesn't mean that the Niounomiya siblings are useless. Hagihara Shiogi can even toy with *Fragment* at her will. Hey... you, if you're acquainted with Hagihara Shiogi, then won't you introduce me to her? Perhaps Hagihara Shiogi could be my *that.* The demon child of the Four Gods and One Mirror. Hagihara Shiogi, the *Strategist*.

If I were to try to guess a little, her computational ability is probably five times higher than mine... I thought a fate where I could meet a monster like that was impossible, but if she's someone you know, things might not be that desperate. Even if I'm wrong, I'd be willing to give you one of the two seats in the *Thirteen Stairs* left open without Izumu and Rizumu. The Four Gods and One Mirror can't handle someone like that, the computational ability of Hagihara Shiogi is a blade that can only cut under me."

The fox-masked man continued in a feverish tone.

"What do you say, Onii-san? Do me a favor and introduce me to her. Then I'll answer your earlier unanswered questions. I'll tell you the cheap truth behind this case."

"No... It's a very tempting offer, but since the organization Shiogi-chan was affiliated with got destroyed, I got cut off from her. I can't get in touch with her."

"Is that so... that's a shame." The fox-masked man was clearly disappointed. Depending on the angle, he appeared to be more disappointed than when he heard of Zerozaki Hitoshiki's death from Rizumu-chan. It was a bit surprising that this man had such emotions. "It can't be helped... Back Nozzle can also work against you. Things that won't happen will definitely not happen, and even if they do, they have no meaning. Well... still, I'll continue to think that if we have a connection, we'll meet each other eventually. If she's as much a monster as the rumors say, as long as she's not attacked by her relatives, she probably won't die... By the way, what does that give you? I couldn't get the point of that question, but it won't give you anything. I still have a bit more time, so I could give you another chance."

"**No... it's fine like this.**"

I answered.

Alright... I got it.

I finally got there.

I had a leap of imagination.

The magic was dispelled.

The formula was completed.

If they didn't fight against Shiogi-chan... if the Niounomiya siblings haven't directly interacted with Shiogi-chan, then I already have an answer.

Now that I think about it, **that** was the only constraint.

If that's the case, then the prerequisite will collapse.

It's simple.

It's clear.

The answer... was just that.

"Thank you, Mr. Fox."

"Yeah... I don't really get it, but, well, if it's okay with you, that's fine. It doesn't sound like you're bluffing either. Then, If we have a connection---"

And.

The fox-masked man was about to say his signature phrase when I heard something like a warning sound coming from my pants pocket. It was the ringtone that Kasugai-san had set without my permission. The one singing this heavy metal ringtone from hell was.....

I don't even want to think about it.

Really... what a person.

".....Is it fine if I leave?'

"Ah, no. Please excuse me."

"Yeah. Then I'll go now. Ciao"

As soon as the fox-masked man turned his back on me, I pulled out my cell phone out of my pocket. The number on the LCD screen was a familiar one.

Really.....

It should have taken three days.

"Hey!"

Suddenly, I was yelled at.

"You, what are you hiding from me, you moron!"

"....."

I moved the phone slightly away from my face.

My head shook.

"Hello, Jun-san..."

As one would expect.

As one would expect, even I couldn't call her by her last name in this situation.

"It's not hello! Why didn't you contact me when Ichihime died, you fool! Not only did you not contact me, but you're the one who covered it up! I don't know what happened, but did you really think I was going to blame you?! I'm not that lame of a person, you idiot! I was the one who entrusted you with Ichihime, you, what are you doing trying to steal that responsibility off of me!! *That* is mine, give it back!"

"....."

"If you mess up, I'll forgive you, so explain the situation! You're a pain in the ass, but I don't care! You should really start to trust me! Why does my greatness not come through to you, even you must see it, right!? I'm the best, or are you too stupid to understand that?! I'm coming over now, so don't move from there!"

"....."

Really.....

Really, this person feels good.

What a good person.

I want to thank you.

And tell you my gratitude.

That I was able to meet you.

That I was able to meet you in this Story.

.....But.

".....You don't need to worry."

Let's end it already.

The period where I've caused trouble for you will end here.

I really wanted to stay under your protection forever. Even now, I really think that from the bottom of my heart. I want to hide in your shadow for the rest of my life. I even thought about becoming someone who tells your stories. I want to be a bystander, telling your story from the outside. Because the fact that I know you is my pride and dignity.

But.

That's no longer any good.

That's... not forgivable anymore.

It's not something that'll be forgiven.

Because *that* is mine.

"You don't need to worry"

"Huuuh?"

"I've... already solved most of it. All that's left is to finish it... I'm truly sorry, **but this time I'm the one who'll wrap things up.**" I said clearly with all of my determination. "At that time, I would by all means like to borrow Jun-san's power... will you help me? I'm going to come up with a *plan*... could I insert you into it?"

"....."

Aikawa-san was silent for a short while.

"That's quite... optimistic. How?"

"It's... nothing much."

"Okay, that's fine. I'll hear it when we meet... So, where do you want me to go?"

"Will you accept?"

"That's a stupid question. What would happen if Humanity's Strongest Contractor refused a request... I don't know what it is, but it sounds interesting."

"Of course. After involving you in this matter, I wouldn't do something that would bore you, Jun-san."

"Hah. Then let's do it flashily... it's Himecchi's battle of revenge. Since the Niounomiya Troupe is involved, I won't have to hold back for once."

"Then... for now, let's meet up at the Kyoto Imperial Palace. I'll head there now. I'm a bit far away at the moment, so I'll be there in three hours."

"Roger."

"See you, Aikawa-san."

"You, don't call me by----"

I hung up halfway through.

It was a bit funny.

Well, the preparation is done.

Let's go do... what I want to do.

I don't really know what's going to happen since I've never done this before, but I can just leave the things I don't understand as they are.

In any case, the result will come out.

Whichever the result is.

Which result?

No, the result will always be one fixed thing.

When I got up from the cushion,

"....."

".....Huh?"

The fox-masked man was there, still with his back to me.

He was there.

"Didn't you go home?"

".....Aikawa..... Jun."

The fox-masked man mumbled.

And then he turned around with incredible speed.

It was so dreadful that I could feel the pressure from underneath the mask.

"Just now, you said Aikawa Jun, right?"

"Y-yes...."

I nodded without thinking.

The fox-masked man's body was trembling.... he was vibrating so much that you'd think he was having some kind of seizure. While convulsing, he was cowering. His reaction was even more intense than when he heard Shiogi-chan's name earlier.

"Aikawa Jun... Overkill Red... Death Colored Crimson... Hermit Killer... Desert Eagle..."

"Eh.....?" Death Colored Crimson? "Um, Mr. Fox---"

".....Kukkukku."

Then.

".....Ahahahahahahaha!"

The fox-masked man laughed with all his strength.

"**So you were the right choice**! When we met last time, I thought that it was **possible**... but *it was further than possible*! There's nothing further than this! It's truly unparalleled! How is this possible?! Not on Zerozaki Hitoshiki's side, but on yours! This ordinary looking man that I *just happened to meet in the middle of nowhere*... Ahahahahahahahahaha! Kigamine, you really, really, really have a good eye! That's what I expect from the woman who, without bending, followed and followed and followed after me! Okay, in the end, I finally respect you! I will kneel before you!"

"Wait... um?"

"You! Ahaha, what the hell are you?! You yourself are nothing but an ordinary, unremarkable brat and yet what's with all that black chaos swirling around you?! It's a melting pot of heresy and the grotesque, you truly are hell! Ahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha! Hahahahahahahaha! Delightful, delightful! Interesting, interesting! It's been a long time since something this interesting has happened! Why is the world so interesting?! It's truly a mystery! How murderously crazy is this universe?!"

"----Hi."

I suppressed the scream that I almost let out unconsciously.

I instinctively retreated.

Ah... scary.

For the first time in my life, I felt fear.

All the fear that I had felt up to now was nothing compared to this. If you say that this is fear, then I've never known fear before. My heart was beating so fast it felt like it was about to burst.

Fear.

Fear fear fear fear fear.

fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear.

This is fear.

It's unthinkable nonsense.

This man is....

Scary.

A cold sweat seeped out of me. My heart cracked.

Until just now, until just a second ago, I can't believe I was having a conversation with this person. Just how thin the rope I was walking on... I don't want to think about it.

"He-he-help---"

"Wonderful! It's too wonderful! I see. I didn't get to meet Zerozaki Hitoshiki, so I was destined to meet you. What a splendid Jail Alternative. Normally, a double of Zerozaki, an alternative to the ultimate killer and the absolute killer shouldn't exist! Why, why! However, my hypothesis wasn't wrong!"

He firmly grabbed me by the shoulders without any restraint.

"Ahahahahaha! Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha, kukkukku---

Nice to meet you, my enemy.

I was finally able to meet you, I look forward to seeing you in the future and having a long relationship! Ahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

And then the fox-masked man pushed me away. I landed on my butt on the tatami. The fox-masked man finally stopped laughing and, "Kukkukku" he laughed again and turned his back to me.

"It's time to leave this place. This lame clinic isn't fit to be the stage for our meeting. It's not even worthy of an introduction, it's a foreshadowing, at best. Well, now I will be busy, I will be busy, it will be hard, it will be hard, it's a furious dance, it's a confused mess! It's fun, it's fun, it's fun, it's fun, run, dance with joy and joy and joy and joy! Go crazy, go crazy, break, break go ill, go ill, go ill, go ill! Sing, sublimate, cheer, collapse! It's the end, it's the beginning, it's the stopping point, it's the quickening! Now, I have to get ready. Only half of the *Thirteen Stairs* are present because I didn't expect things to progress this quickly. First of all, you need to deal with this rubbish, you must close this story concerning the Niounomiya siblings. You can't let this kind of unimportant thing cause you problems later on. **I don't care whose power you borrow, just clean it up properly**. I don't want my fun to be lessened by even a tiny bit. Did you hear? Put your heart into it. Now, you need to realize with all the conviction in your soul that you can do it. You have now... closed every other destiny."

"Closed....."

"All you have left is causality with me. No, it was like that from the beginning. It's an unavoidable destiny, it's the Story's plot. Neither you nor I can go anywhere anymore. Now we won't be allowed to take a single detour anywhere until the Dying Epilogue!"

"What does that mean?"

"It's the same whether it has a meaning or not. So, since we have a *bond*, we'll meet again whether you want to or not. In the meantime, don't forget

to train yourself. Realize that self-improvement is the only duty you possess."

"....."

The fox-masked man stepped across the threshold and out into the hallway.

I....

"You... who are you?"

Almost impulsively. Even though I didn't want to get involved any more, I asked. I couldn't help but ask. I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"You... what are you to Aikawa-san?"

"Hmm... me?"

The fox-masked man turned only his head.

He took off his mask and showed his true face.

His true face which looked a lot like her's.

His smile which looked a lot like her's.

"I'm me. The time to name myself hasn't come yet. My introduction will be on another day. If you want to call me by some sort of identifier... let's see. Humanity's Worst Player or something like that"

Then the fox-asked man continued.

"Aikawa Jun is my daughter."

CHAPTER 10 — DESTROYING WORST (DEVOURING GUILT)

NIOUNOMIYA IZUMU
PROFESSIONAL KILLER

0

Goodbye.

There won't be another chance.

1

Death.

Let's think about death.

In this world, that's something that holds a big meaning, something that doesn't *die* doesn't exist. All molecular structures, both living and nonliving, eventually arrive to their *death* in regret. No one, nothing, can escape from that law. To the point that you start to think that everything exists for the sole purpose of *dying*. Everything without exception arrives at death. If we could somehow stop our train of thought there, that would mean that *death* and *nothing* are not equal. At the least by thinking that way, humanity has been able to face the concept of death.

The most extreme example of that is religion.

We gave meaning to *death*.

We gave a sequel to *death*.

We gave a resurrection after *death*.

Both medicine and philosophy are the same as religion in trying to overcome death. Yes, everyone is afraid to die. A human being who doesn't mind dying can only be thought of as not having a correct understanding of *death*, being falsely convinced that they will be the only one to not die.

Or, perhaps they are truly someone who won't die.

However, people have to die.

That's the rule.

Not dying would be against the rules.

Against the rules of the game that is this world.

But how would that feel?

To be continuing forever.

After all, if you don't end somewhere, then you won't be able to endure it, right? If you don't set an end somewhere, people will get tired, won't they? The reason that people can run as fast as they can is because they only have to go for a hundred meters. Without setting an objective or a destination, there's no way one could run at full speed. It's said that if there is a beginning, there will be an end, but it's precisely because there is an end that people can decide to begin something, isn't it?

Really.

Does everyone really think that they don't want to die?

Is life that much fun?

I wasn't like that. It's not that I thought that it'd be fine to die whenever, back then, I never used to make the distinction between being alive and dead. That's right, the me back before I had yet met Overkill Red, the Orange Seed, that blue boy, or even my little sister, at that time, I didn't know about life or death.

I didn't know.

I was strong back then, when I didn't know

The me who didn't know of the end was strong.

Because I was strong... I was weak.

A body that won't die.

What would happen if you were given something like that?

If there was no end.

What would humans become if they were given eternity? Pain would become dull, wars would stop, and I'm sure various other things would be

abandoned. The feelings that were important when there was an end would be easily thrown away....

And people would spend their time as if they were dead.

In the truest sense of the word, it's nonsense.

Yes, that's right.

When I had no problem dying, when life didn't mean anything to me, I spent my time like that. The me who didn't know about life or death. If something is fine with dying, then it doesn't exist to begin with. There was no need to make the distinction between life and death.

I wasn't a resident of a world where life and death existed.

That's why....

It was the same no matter what I did.

I was the weakest, so I was the strongest.

I was the strongest, so I was the weakest.

And I can say one more thing.

I was... the worst.

This still hasn't changed.

Dead as if I was alive.

Living as if I was dead.

Trying to forget I was living.

Wanting to forget I was living.

Yes, that's how it is.

Because that's how it is, don't break the rules.

Recognize death. Acquire death. Catch death.

Face death. Win against death. Battle with death.

Are you afraid to die?

Even then, face it.

Devour death.

This is that kind of story.

If you're prepared to die, you won't die while you're living.

".....It's about time "

I checked the time on my phone one last time.

The date that was displayed....

August 19th, Friday.

5 minutes until 11 p.m.

The old clock on the wall also displayed the same time.

I turned off my phone and put it on top of the table. I was told to contact Aikawa-san any time, but even without being told that, I knew it was the right way to do things, but even then... I don't want any unnecessary obstacles to get involved. I don't want any unnecessary variables to get mixed in. If that happens, the stage that I set will be ruined.

"....."

I was in the same place as yesterday, in Assistant Professor Kigamine's laboratory, formerly the Saitou Clinic, sitting alone on a cushion in the waiting room without the lights on.

I didn't come back to the apartment.

After that yesterday, I made my way to the Kyoto Imperial Palace and had an all night discussion with Aikawa-san about Hime-chan and our future plans. And then I immediately came back here.

If I came back to the apartment, my resolve would've dulled.

That's right, I'm weak.

My resolve would lessen with such a small thing.

Even if there is a solution on one side and an explanation can be seen on the other side, I only have the uneasy, brittle, and flimsy intention to return to my original position.

Good grief. In the truest sense of the word, I'm pathetic.

There's a limit to how spineless one can be.

Is this really something that you can accomplish?

The voice of doubt sprang up from the inside.

Do you really understand what you're about to do? If you really understood, you wouldn't be acting so carefreely. Am I wrong? You're just trying to act cool, aren't you?

Always vague.

With an indecisive attitude.

It's unclear whether I'm even alive or dead.

Can you fight with that?

"....."

.....It's laughable.

I'm not going to fight.

I'm not going to win or lose.

Winning and losing are just the stepping stones towards the future.

Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, that's natural. There's no such thing as a life with only victories, and neither is there a life with only losses. The ones who keep winning just don't notice those who keep losing, and the ones who keep losing just don't notice those who keep winning. Those who are strong just don't know they are weak, and those who are strong just don't know they are strong.

I'm weak, overwhelmingly weak.

But once you're aware of that weakness....

"Well, it won't go like a game of shogi."

That reminds me, someone once told me that there's no existence more unfortunate in modern society than a shogi or a go player. They can only use their unique and fearsome brains on the board. In a different world, the abilities of those *strategists* could easily shake the whole world.

However.

That's the same for everyone.

Even for Assistant Professor Kigamine who was only continuing.

Even for Kuchiha-chan who couldn't die.

Even for Hime-chan, and Rizumu-chan, and Izumu-kun.

Speaking of bad luck, that was bad luck.

Speaking of misfortune, that was unfortunate.

At least to the same extent as me.

"But they would probably never want... to receive pity from someone like me."

They're not dead.

They were alive.

Make this uninteresting world interesting.....

"Ding-dong."

The sound of the intercom.

I tried to check the time on my phone, but then remembered I had turned it off. So I looked at the old clock on the wall instead. Exactly 11 p.m.

"....."

Hmm.

Surprisingly, they seemed to be precisely on time.

There was no sound of a door opening.

No sound of someone taking their shoes off and walking into the hallway.

That level of sound was completely erased.

Not long after, the sliding door opened suddenly.

".....Yo."

I was the one to speak first.

I didn't intend for it to be a preemptive strike.

First of all, that kind of thing wouldn't work.

".....Huh?"

He who had opened the sliding door....

Niounomiya Izumu tilted his head as if confused.

"Why are you here?"

2

Izumu-kun wasn't in his usual straitjacket.

He was wearing thin leather pants and a small leather jacket. He wasn't wearing anything underneath the jacket, so you could clearly see his pale body that was so thin you could make out the shape of his bones, and his small breasts were peeking out. He was barefoot, without any socks. Izumu-kun's long arms which didn't match with his small stature were no longer hidden in a straightjacket, so you could clearly see them.

Those arms.

Those hands.

Those fingers....

"Huh? That's weird... I was called by the *Death Colored Crimson*... that I should come here," Izumu-kun said, looking out of place and deeply confused from the bottom of his heart. "It seems that Yukariki Ichihime was *Death Color*'s kin, so to get revenge----"

"Aikawa-san is my girlfriend. We're in love."

I straightened my back and faced Izumu-kun.

"You're quite something too. You've got a lot of nerve, don't you? Did you really think you were going to fight directly to death with my girlfriend? Even in games and novels, before the final boss, there's always a middle boss."

"....."

Izumu-kun looked at me with piercing eyes.

It seemed like he had trouble responding.

".....And you're the middle boss?"

"That's right."

"Gyahahaha!" Izumu laughed loudly. "It's the first time I've seen a middle boss this weak! Even the Koopalings are a bit stronger!"

".....I have no words to deny that."

".....Hahahaha. Ah... I see. You too. You're angry that I killed that girl, Yukariki. Yeah, sorry, I really do feel bad that I had to break our promise."

Breaking the promise.

It was as if he was only apologizing for that.

About having killed Hime-chan....

It was as if he didn't even think anything about it.

"Honestly, I'm relieved." I strung my words together while half ignoring Izumu-kun, who was still laughing. "Well, I thought that it was near impossible, but I considered that maybe it would be Rizumu-chan who would come here. The possibility of that wasn't zero."

"Well, that's right... Ah, that means," Izumu-kun said. "It's not just *Death Color,* you're also aware of our sibling's **trick**."

"Yeah," I nodded. "Or rather, the one who realized it and relayed it to Aikawa-san was me. However, if Aikawa-san had been involved in this case from the beginning, I'm sure she could have closed it without anyone dying."

"I'll tell you just in case."

Izumu-kun said boldly, without any hint of remorse.

"Hating me is absurd, you know? You're barking up the wrong tree, *Death Color* obviously, but you too. It was on Mr. Fox's orders that I massacred Kigamine and Madoka. What's wrong with a professional killer killing? When you kill someone with a gun, do you think that it's the gun's fault? You don't, right?"

".....But Hime-chan was..."

"Aaah, that kid. It's true she wasn't my prey as a *professional killer*. However," Izumu-kun said. "Even so, when an organism is **about to get killed**, it has to protect itself."

"....."

".....If I remember correctly, *self defence* was allowed in our contract, right?"

".....Right."

As expected, it was like that.

So it was like that.

That was what we finally agreed on in yesterday's discussion with Aikawa-san. There were other possibilities, so we couldn't be sure, but if that was the case, it means the one who destroyed the tires of the Fiat, the Katana, and the Z was Hime-chan.

Hime-chan, you idiot.

But in this case, Hime-chan wasn't the only idiot. Aikawa-san shouldn't have chosen Hime-chan as my bodyguard, and I shouldn't have agreed to it. Regardless of whether the tires were punctured, at that time, I should have gone over the mountain and returned to the apartment.

Hime-chan was a former soldier. It wasn't in her nature to leave an enemy in front of her, that's how she was raised. Both Aikawa-san and I should have understood that very well. We should have understood that. That there was no way Hime-chan would leave the *Cannibal*, the *Niounomiya* right in front of her alone. That was something we should have understood already.

Hime-chan's sense of duty was too strong.

Her habits didn't leave.

Her former bad habits.

Her fighting instinct.

"But I wonder how Hime-chan noticed that you were a *Niounomiya*. You had adopted a false name, and Rizumu-chan was properly performing in front of Hime-chan.

"The smell, I guess," Izumu-kun said. "Don't you know? Murderers have the smell of blood and decayed flesh ingrained in them. I had noticed that Yukariki Ichihime was a *murderer*, right? So why do you think that the opposite is impossible?"

"I see. I understand."

"**Or that's what I would have wanted to say**."

However, Izumu-kun continued further.

"**Don't forget that I have Rizumu-chan to make that impossible**. As long as Rizumu was there, there's no way that we siblings would have been exposed as a *professional killer*."

"....."

"In other words, you and I were too careless. It's not Rizumu's fault, nor is it Kigamine's fault. You and I were too careless and spoke too much. At that time, I shouldn't have come out to the courtyard, and you shouldn't have told anything to Yukariki Ichihime."

Me?

No, I kept it a secret from Hime-chan. I'm sure that I never told Hime-chan that I knew Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun from before.

.....However.

It's not like she couldn't have seen through it with my *unnatural behavior*. Maybe just me asking Hime-chan about the *Nionomiya* was enough in the first place.

"Then, as I thought, it's my fault?"

"Who knows. Anyway, we were probably already past the point where we could trick her. It wasn't a truth that could be covered up by a lie. No, no, Yukariki Ichihime was surprisingly not that stupid. She must have had a certain amount of insight."

"....."

Yes, I had forgotten that too.

Hime-chan might have been an idiot, but she possessed an outstanding combat sense. Furthermore, Hime-chan was very good at lying. It wasn't just something she was good at, it was a way of life for her, just like my nonsense. I should have known that quite well back in June. She could create a fiction that would make you not notice what you'd normally notice as easily as she breathed.....

"But she was a strong opponent. I wasn't able to get away unscathed. I had no experience in dealing with a *string technique* user, and that kid's abilities as a soldier were through the roof. She was nearly at the highest level, comparable to a pro player. Who the hell was she? Maybe she was someone famous enough that Mr. Fox would know her. I didn't expect to see a string technique user in my line. I was surprised."

"Can you tell me the details?"

"Details? Ah, I see. Unfortunately, there aren't any to speak of. She simply forced that fight in the courtyard when she found herself alone with Rizumu in the middle of the night. We didn't have any reason to flee or refuse when challenged."

"....."

"She touched on the **keyword**, so I came out and we had a fight."

".....I see."

Then that was right after Kuchiha-chan had called me to take a shower. If I assume that, it would match up with the time when I passed her on the stairs. When I returned to our room after exchanging words with Kigamine, she was already no longer in bed.

Hime-chan.

At that time... what was she thinking? Did she think she would come back? Or maybe... No, there's no point in thinking about that kind of thing. If that were true, there'd be nothing to be saved.

"Our world is flexible due to violence. Pacifism is ultimately based on violence. If she had won, we would have erased ourselves from your sight. That was the condition. I told her, you know? That I wouldn't lay my hands on you, but she wouldn't even listen."

"Well, she was a stubborn girl."

"That's right. She's not the type who listens to her enemies, so she won't live a long life. Oh right, I killed her, didn't I? Gyahaha!"

"....."

"Laugh." Izumu-kun clicked his tongue, not even trying to hide his irritation. "In short, Yukariki had killed too many people to live. Once you become like that, it's already too late. Having killed that many people and then trying to live, and as a normal high school girl at that, it's too shameless. Even you understand that, don't you? Yukariki Ichihime had killed too many people to continue living. Yukariki Ichihime was too strong... she was too weak."

She had killed too many people to continue living.

Maybe that's true.

Hime-chan had been taught that for a long time.

Kill the enemy.

Hunt whoever gets in your way.

Never let risk factors escape.

Don't hesitate, cut off their heads and then think about it.

Don't miss the opportunity. Don't trust, it'll get you killed.

That's what she had been taught all along.

To the point where it was ingrained.

To the point where it couldn't be removed.

To the point where she wouldn't be able to count her own death as death.

To the point that if there was an enemy nearby, she couldn't hesitate.

Then, was it already too late for Hime-chan?

Was everything too late for Hime-chan?

Happiness and fun....

Was everything too late?

"....."

That's... not true.

That wasn't the case.

I can affirm that.

I don't care what anyone says, I can affirm it.

".....After having killed Hime-chan, what did you do?"

"To be honest, I had no intention of killing her when we first started to fight. I also had that promise with you," Izumu-kun confessed reluctantly. "But I had no other choice than to kill her. I had no other choice than to kill her. I thought that she would calm down after having both of her arms **devoured**, but that wasn't the case at all. That kid was no joke. It was impossible."

"....."

Right.

Even for Shiogi-chan, handling Hime-chan and Tamamo-chan was difficult. She wasn't half-hearted, she wasn't half-baked. She wasn't the kind of opponent you could fight while holding back. She was too strong. Even the *Cannibal* couldn't hold back.

"There was nothing I could do, so I advanced my *plans*. Having killed one person, I had no other choice but to change my schedule... even if that meant breaking my promise with you. In the first place, there was no longer any promise or anything since I had killed Yukariki at that point. It was mostly null and void. The promise was already broken."

".....Well, that's right."

"Well, Rizumu's *investigation* only lasted a day, so she hadn't reached a conclusion, but to some extent, she already had an inference for those two. Even though she's my own sister, that's quite some work for one day. However, there was no denying the lack of information, so I decided to be honest."

"Honest?"

"I asked those two. Kigamine was up working and I woke Madoka from her sleep. 'I was sent here by Mr. Fox, probably that Saitou you called your mentor, he told me to kill you guys, what will you do?'"

Izumu-kun showed me his long arms.

As if tempting me.

As if seducing me.

As if inviting me.

"The two nodded their heads and said, 'Then please do so.' Against that, I was at a loss."

"**Please do so**... was it?"

I couldn't hide my surprise.

My voice trembled.

That was... unexpected.

Even Aikawa-san didn't say that.

"In regards to Madoka, she said something about not wanting to dirty the bed, so she chose the shower room as her place of death. In reality, I think those two were probably tired."

The assistant professor who continued to follow the fox-masked man.

The girl who had died without being able to die.

They got tired.

Tired, as if rotting.

That's why... they accepted death?

That kind of fantasy is absurd. They just gave up when the professional killer appeared in front of them. They simply despaired at the sight of the professional killer sent by their former mentor. That's all it was. Who could die for a reason such as being tired? If you do that kind of thing....

If you do something so brazen as if you were an insect....

Death would lose meaning.

Once you accept death, it ceases to exist.

If you're not alive, you won't die.

Because you won't die, you're not alive.

Then, in the truest sense....

It's a body that won't die.

".....I'm tired too."

Izumu-kun said.

He sounded really tired.

"I'm tired too. Tired of killing people. Tired of doing my job. After killing those two, after talking to them, that's what I thought. No. I've been tired since a long time ago."

".....That's," I said. "**That's why you tried to erase your existence after that**."

"Some time ago, Mr. Fox described me as a workaholic, a murder lover, a murder addict, and I can only say that that's entirely correct. But what comes after addiction is just boredom."

".....Boredom?"

"Yeah. Not overwhelming, not ultimate, not absolute, not fatal, just boredom. Did you know? Some mammals have a system built into their genes that allows them to die naturally when they get tired of being alive. I once heard that from Mr. Fox. Don't you think that's the best program? ...Those two also, weren't they just tired of living?"

"That's...."

I understand that for Kuchiha-chan.

She had lived too long.

But what about Assistant Professor Kigamine?

She hadn't lived long enough to get tired.

She probably wasn't living.

She wasn't supposed to be alive.

"**The reason why you were so tired, wasn't it rather because you had fought with Hime-chan**?"

".....Maybe. It's possible."

Izumu-kun nodded for the time being.

He didn't deny it.

Honestly, I didn't understand. But still, Hime-chan, Kuchiha-chan, and Assistant Professor Kigamine, killing those three was probably more of an opportunity than a cause for Izumu-kun. It was the trigger, not the bullet itself.

A caged bird.

Izumu-kun was, of continuing to be a *Niounomiya*....

Of continuing to be kept by the fox-masked man....

Of continuing to be Rizumu-chan's back....

Of continuing to be Rizumu-chan's front....

Bored.

"Gyahahahaha!" Izumu-kun suddenly laughed loudly. "Well, that's why! I was thinking of using it as a chance to retire, but then I received a call from *Death Color*. What the hell is that? What, what! Was this all something you set up?"

"Well, yes."

I stood up.

"Because no matter what, I wanted to see you."

I wanted to meet.

I wanted to meet and talk.

I had already deduced from the fox-masked man's words that Izumu-kun was about to enter into a life of seclusion. A caged bird. That in itself was fine. That's Izumu-kun's freedom. The problem is my freedom. How to catch Izumu-kun's tail.

At any rate, no matter how I thought about it, it was impossible for me. Even if I asked Kunagisa, Izumu-kun was a resident of a world outside of the Kunagisa Syndicate's reach. Setting aside the fact that we couldn't investigate, it would also mean having to cross a somewhat dangerous bridge. There's no way I could make Kunagisa do that kind of thing. That's why I asked the one who's a resident of every world, Humanity's Strongest Contractor, Overkill Red, Aikawa Jun, to appear on the scene.

"But if you want to summon Izumu who's going into seclusion, you'll need some decisive bait, and this guy isn't half-assed about that kind of thing. If we contact him poorly, he'll just escape. Do you have such convenient bait?"

To Aikawa-san's question, I answered, "You don't need to worry about it." Right, I had heard before what Izumu-kun wished for. The *thing* Izumu-kun desires, I heard it. At that point, I still didn't know that the *Death Colored Crimson* was Aikawa-san, but....

That itself was convenient.

More than convenient, it was a good connection.

".....Hmmm." Izumu-kun narrowed his eyes. "It seems I'm a popular guy. But, unfortunately, I don't particularly want to see you. Gyahaha, I'm a pretty sinful man, aren't I? Haha. Well, speaking seriously, I don't want there to be any awkward feelings either. Even so, do you really care? About the promise I broke."

"Don't say such cold things. I'm persistent, you know? It'd be the worst thing in the world to have a stalker like me. Be careful about how you handle it."

"Gyahaha... I get that you're serious."

"And I set up a battle with the *Death Colored Crimson*, remember? That's your lifelong wish, isn't it?"

"It's more of a regret than a wish."

Izumu-kun spread out his arms like a peacock.

Long arms. Excessively long, slender arms.

It was an intimidating pose.

"I... I wanted something to measure exactly how far I've come. In that sense, you got a nice thing set up for me. Soooooo, how does this system work? After breaking through you, will the *Death Colored Crimson* appear?"

"Aikawa-san isn't here. I'm the only one who knows where she is. Aikawa-san will be waiting there for you until a certain time. If you can make me talk, you win. If you can't make me talk, you lose."

"My win and my loss, huh. Hmmmm. My win and my loss...." Izumu-kun repeated as if chewing on it. "Do you have a win condition?"

"The only one who can win is you. Either you win or you lose, only one of those. I have no intention of doing any of that." I said clearly, without any embarrassment, even though I thought it was a ridiculous statement. "I just want to realize."

"Realize? What?"

"Who knows...."

I pulled out the blade-shaped knife from my holster. Since I had been sitting there for a long time, I had imagined it all the way through. I pointed the knife towards Izumu-kun in front of me, put my left foot on the table, and aimed at his thin neck....

"....Boring."

With a whirl, my vision rotated.

Without having the time to grasp what just happened, without having the time to realize that my foot on the table was **somehow** brushed away, I fell on the table on my left shoulder. I immediately protected my body with my right hand, but before I could take the next action, Izumu extended his foot towards me and his toes pierced into my ribs.

"Guh... Ah!?"

A weird pain I've never experienced before attacked my abdomen, making me roll and fall off the table. The cushion that I had been sitting on earlier absorbed the impact, but it didn't neutralize all of the shock.

With a crack, my ribs creaked.

By now, there was pain even in the ankle that had been brushed away.

"Guuuuuuh."

"It's not broken... I just **removed** a couple of ribs, but don't push yourself. Those dislocated ribs are no longer armor but a weapon to your internal organs."

"....."

"I couldn't restrain myself with the leg I hit, so I might have cracked it. If it's just that, you can bear it. You're a man, right?" Izumu-kun said while laughing slightly. "So, where's *Death Color*? Where should I go to meet *Death Color*?"

".....Good grief." While enduring the pain still running through my abdomen, I lifted my upper body. I glared at Izumu-kun. "In your world, does *Cannibal* mean a pervert who strokes someone's belly with the end of his

foot? I can't introduce such a low level pervert to Aikawa-san. To introduce you to Aikawa-san, you must be a little more deviant."

".....It seems you don't understand." Izumu-kun didn't respond to my cheap provocation. He talked like he was trying to persuade a child. "The gap between your combat power and mine, it's not a gap that can be filled with spirit, bravery, or even your skillful nonsense. At the very least, when it comes to fighting a head on battle. Looking at you, your body is somewhat trained, and I understand that your reflexes aren't that bad either, but I'm a professional player. Your movements look still to me. Whether it be an ambush or a trick, even If I respond after confirming your movement, I can still react in time."

"....."

"Torture is the Hakamori's territory, so it's not my speciality, but it's not like I don't know how to do it. Look, I won't say anything bad. I'll tell you before I cutely start doing cruel things to you."

"Cutely, huh....." I repeated Izumu-kun's words. "Then don't you think there's a better way than torture? If you try to seduce me, I might easily give it away. I can't stop thinking about your nipples that have been appearing and disappearing out of view. Ah, but... that's that. That, yeah, that. I mean, it's that, you know."

".....Huh?"

"It's no good if the person is younger than me... **somehow, it reminds me of my little sister, and that makes me lose interest.**"

".....I don't get you, dude." There was some irritation mixed in Izumu-kun's voice. Anger at me who he couldn't understand... that didn't seem to be it. "I don't get you, I really don't get you. I can only think that you're crazy. How's your brain doing? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yes yes yes yes! Then, the very gentle Professor Izumu will explain it to you in a way that even a pig could understand. I will show you a sight that's much easier to understand than words. A death sentence for both of your eyes. These arms."

Izumu-kun showed me the back of his arms from the elbows. His fingers faced towards the back of his hands and took the form of a rake.

"Do you know? Or do you not know? These were how I got the name *Man Eater*. These arms themselves are my speciality. **Take a good look**...."

Suddenly, Izumu-kun rotated his arms, bending both of his rake-like hands backwards, and swung them down at the table!

"----**That's how it is***!"*

The sound of destruction.

Or rather, it was the sound of an explosion.

When I opened my eyes, I inadvertently closed them again because of the impact. Izumu-kun's arms had pierced into the tatami on the floor up to his wrists. The table had been completely gouged through, as if a grizzly had swung down on it, as it was eaten.

The wooden table was about five centimeters thick.

And then... with those thin, feminine arms.

"It's not The Hand. It's my, Niounomiya Izumu's, treasured sword, *Eating One.*" Izumu-kun laughed ominously. "If you train the human body without thinking about the consequences, you can reach this level. I'm a living example of that. Obviously, it's not just this *Eating One*. Even with these legs, if I kicked normally, I could easily bend something like the human neck. The incredible amount of restraint I had to exercise on your ribs... you already understand it, don't you?"

"*.....Eating One.*"

Kuchiha-chan, who had her upper and lower half split apart.

Assistant Professor Kigamine, who had her left shoulder cut off.

Hime-chan, who had both of her arms cut off.

"I see... I was wondering about what kind of weapon you used to be able to do such a thing. So you just used a hidden technique."

I must be quite something to be able to sleep through all those explosive sounds. I had heard about *Eating One* from the fox-masked man, but I didn't think it would be a one-hit surekill technique. I see, it's as Kunagisa said... the

ultimate personification of the grotesque. Abnormal abilities that go one level beyond ultimate.

"Izumu-kun will show even more kindness and teach you a good thing, Onii-san. The weak point of this technique, or rather it's drawback, **is that I can't hold back at all.**" Izumu-kun showed me the palm of his hands that were still in the form of a rake and then showed the back of his hands. "That's why I had to wear that straitjacket so that I wouldn't go on a rampage. Gyahaha. In fact, as you can see, I can only produce that level of destructive power. That's the default, I can't set it to different levels. That level of power that can even destroy an iron plate is the norm. However, that's not a weak point, but a flaw. Come on, man, think about it. If you ate this thing, or **if you were eaten by this thing**, it would be a tragedy. You can't defend against *Eating One*, defending has no meaning. If you took it with your arms or your legs, they would just get blown away. In fact, even more than the damage, the wounds it leaves are terrible. Even though it's my own treasured sword, it's unpleasant, like an explosion. You can't even stitch together the torn wounds. It's an irreparable, absolute injury."

Izumu-kun picked up a shard of the table that was scattered away and threw it lightly towards me. The shard fell just besides me.

A shard.

Or perhaps, a piece of meat.

"I haven't tested it, but with one hit from these arms, I could probably completely erase a child the size of a preschooler from the world." Once again, Izumu-kun faced me and spread out his body. "However, when I slaughter, I always use this because it's ***not painful***. Since I destroy the nerves faster than they can transfer information, it doesn't hurt at all. It's close to benevolence, but essentially it's just because I don't want to hear the screams. It's best to have the least amount of suffering. It's the same with your screams and your suffering. That's why when I do it, I don't hold back. Even against a guy like you with no combat abilities, when I do it without any leniency, I use this."

"That's very... kind of you."

Izumu-kun didn't even follow up on my interruption.

Rather, he looked at me with pity.

The overwhelming difference in power between me and Izumu-kun is something easier to understand from Izumu-kun's point of view. It's much easier to see the gap between the top and bottom from the top rather than the bottom. That's why Izumu-kun must not comprehend why I'm doing something so meaningless.

Meaning.

Whether there is one or not, it's the same.

"I'll say it one last time."

"You don't need to say it."

I....

While still standing only halfway up, I pulled out the Jericho from my belt behind my back and pointed the barrel towards Izumu-kun.

"BAAANG."

I pulled the trigger.

The shock reverberated through the side of my body that was kicked earlier.

".....Ch!"

Izumu-kun jumped to his left. He dodged the bullet. Or rather, by the time I took out the Jericho, he was already taking an evasive action. Even though he shouldn't have noticed that I had a firearm... That's the reason why I attacked with the knife first... Those are quite some reflexes. But that too wasn't unexpected. A human being against who guns don't work on, I have already experienced something like that.

I ran.

Not chasing after Izumu-kun, but towards the sliding door, into the hallway.

".....Don't fuck with me....."

".....Don't fuck with me, asshole!"

An angry voice rang out from behind me.

As I thought, he's the impulsive type.

And also the passionate type..

No matter how much composure you show, no matter how calmly you behave, when you're faced with a danger that threatens to hurt you, your mask will come off. Your composure and your calmness are awfully superficial. Your boiling point is lower than the freezing point. Yes, that's Izumu-kun's strength, and therefore his weakness. Especially because he's specialized in strength, he's vulnerable.

And there's one more thing.

In that exchange, Izumu-kun evaded the Jericho's bullet. The fact that he dodged means that if Izumu-kun had been hit by the bullet, even the *Man Eater* would have suffered damage.

He's not invincible.

Neither is he the strongest.

You couldn't even call him the worst.

He's neither a ghost nor a demon.

He's a human.

With a personality.

I went into the hallway and continued to run. I didn't look back. I didn't even need to look back, I knew that Izumu-kun was following me. I could tell by his footsteps that he didn't even try to hide which pressed down with excessive force.

"**Uoooooooooooooooooooo**!"

The stairs.

As I turned to climb the stairs, I caught the image of Izumu-kun swinging his right arm down out of the corner of my eye.

--------*Eating One*.

"-------Guh!"

After just barely dodging at the last minute so that it only grazed me, I stepped onto the stairs. Izumu-kun swung his right arm too boldly and lost his balance. That's right, because he always swings it at full force, because it's an inhuman one-hit surekill technique, Izumu-kun didn't bother to consider what sort of position he'd end up in after using it. It may be that Izumu-kun lacks composure, but that's also a weakness.

Okay, not bad.

"……Come here!"

While he was fixing his posture, I rushed up the stairs during that instant. My side began to ache with a feverish pain. It may be bad to move around too much. At worst, my ribs could damage my organs like Izumu-kun said.

But….

I don't care about that.

"Don't try to escape, you lame asshole!"

Izumu-kun yelled at me in the darkness and without any hesitation, placed his feet on the stairs and followed after me. After confirming that, I arrived at the landing of the stairs to the second floor.

"There's no way you can escape in such a narrow space, idiot, stupid, fool! Oh, oh, oh, go on, go on, go on, go on, go on, go on!!"

When I arrived.

I turned back towards Izumu-kun and jumped down.

"-----What?"

Izumu-kun looked surprised.

But it was too late.

It was too late.

I just let gravity take over.

And on this narrow staircase of this laboratory which only allowed for one person to fit through at a time, with the bad footing and the walls and handrails on both sides becoming a hindrance, *Eating One* cannot be used.

A flying body attack.

It wasn't something as clever as that, but with my elbow held up against his face and my opposite shoulder on his throat, I rammed into Izumu-kun. Even if he's a killer or a professional player, even if he says exaggerated things like *Man Eater* or *Carnival*, his body still has the stature of a girl.

Although he tried to resist it.

Izumu-kun bent backwards and lost his footing.

We fell down the stairs and arrived at the hallway. His body became sandwiched between me and the hard wooden floor.

"Guh....."

Izumu-kun let out a moan as if he was sobbing. It was nearly a surprise attack to the body. Even he couldn't have taken zero damage. But this isn't the end of the story. This doesn't count as having defeated the *Man Eater*. That's why I'll use this chance. This is my last chance.

I untangeled myself from Izumu-kun and sat on him. I pointed the Jericho that was in my right hand at Izumu-kun's face.

At this point blank range.

In this position.

No matter how much he struggles, he can't evade it.

"----Y-you... asshole!"

At the last moment, Izumu-kun barely managed to lift his arms and grabbed the Jericho's barrel. And before I could pull the trigger, he shifted the muzzle away from his head. I decided that I couldn't do it with one hand, so I also put my left hand on the grip and tried to reposition the muzzle of the gun by force.

"**Guuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh**-----"

"**Ugghhhhhhhhhhhhhh**-----"

This point blank range.

This position.

However, even with those thin girly arms.

Even with all of my strength, it wouldn't even budge. Rather, little by little, the barrel was being shifted to the side. Where is he getting all this

strength from? No, it's not a matter of strength. This doesn't seem to be a simple matter of addition or subtraction. Izumu-kun began to fight back even while being sat on. Even though both his legs should have been firmly locked, Izumu-kun began to shake his torso with force strong enough that it would allow him to get free of this situation with even the slightest inattention.

Inevitably, that created a gap in between my hands that held onto the grip.

Shit, at this rate they won't hold much longer.

This is bad. This is bad. This is bad.

How should I----

".....!"

Whatever.

While still in that position, I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the firing, the sound of the gunpowder exploding... Naturally, since the barrel of the gun was completely off, the direction of the bullet was very far away from Izumu-kun, so it just hit a board in the hallway without piercing anything.

But.

".....Guh?!"

Izumu-kun's strength lessened for a moment.

If you don't stop holding the barrel, you'll receive all of the heat the bullet generates as it passes through. And not only that, if you hear a gunshot near your ear and a bullet passes by it, the sound will be directly transmitted to your brain as vibrations. No matter what kind of training you received, it's not like the structure of the human body will change. There's no way a direct attack on the brain will just go away.

When Izumu-kun's strength lessened, I put all of my strength into pointing the barrel back towards Izumu-kun's forehead. Izumu-kun immediately put his hands back on the barrel, but there wasn't as much strength as earlier. Since I had just fired, the barrel hasn't lost all of its heat.

"-----Fu-fuck.....!"

In an instant.

Izumu-kun completely took his hands off the barrel.

He gave up. There's no way. But in that lying position he can't use *Eating One*... **No**... **can he use it***?* Maybe he can use it just by moving his arms and not his whole body? In reality, Izumu-kun moved his left arm back slightly and stuck it to the floor before swinging it in an arc motion.

Aiming at my face.

Without mercy.

"*Guuh------*"

But if I can dodge it.

If I can dodge his *Eating One*, it'd be set in stone. Once he misses, there'll be a huge opening. The previous blow had already proved that.

This was the watershed moment.

"**Guoooooo------**"

I bent my back as far as I could and avoided his palm. At least, I tried to avoid it. However, Izumu-kun's *Eating One* was so fast that it completely surpassed my reaction speed-----

The truth is.

If Izumu-kun's posture was normal, I would have eaten it.

I would have been eaten by it.

The gauze on my right cheek was torn off and turned into waste. By a literal paper thin distance, I had escaped from the jaws of *Eating One*.

Alright....

Without time to confirm my success.

".....Ah."

I found out Izumu-kun's real aim.

The arm continued travelling in a circular arc and hit the floor as Izumu-kun likely intended.

The earlier gunshot stood no chance against that explosive sound.

The floor **was eaten** and scattered into thousands of fragments which flew towards me. Without any regards to my will, my eyelids instinctively closed in order to protect my eyes-----

"Da!"

In the confusion, I forced myself to put more strength on the trigger. The knockback of the bullet came back to me. While feeling the pain of the pieces of wood stabbing my face, I gently opened my eyes to check the results....

".....Gyahaha."

Izumu-kun.....

Didn't have a single scratch on him.

With a single bite of *Eating One*, he smashed through the floor of the hallway and shifted his head, which was supposed to be fixed in place, away from the barrel. Rather than just sending splinters flying, that probably was his main goal. No, the plan was to attain both.

Niounomiya Izumu....

This is bad. He's not an idiot.

"Since you didn't fire continuously, it seems like you're out of bullets... Alright!!" With just his abdominal muscles, Izumu-kun threw me up slightly, and in that moment, he bent both of his legs, passed them above my inseam, and extended them towards my solar plexus. "How long were you sitting in the cowgirl position?! What are you, a pervert with a strong libido, you dumbass!"

I was sent flying through the air with such force that I wondered if my body was suspended from a wire. I got thrown far backwards to about where Izumu-kun and I were imitating the Shinsengumi, around one step below the landing of the stairs. I hit my back against the corner, and after rolling over, I collapsed on the landing.

"....."

I don't have the time to be collapsed.

There was a dull pain in my back and my side. It wasn't my ribs like earlier, but my organs. It felt like my organs were shaken around. Even if they hadn't ruptured, it was still quite painful. There was no feeling of vomiting, so it wasn't my digestive system, it must have been my circulatory system. Then

the situation is even more serious. I tried to stand up, but every part of my body was shaking and convulsing.

"Guuuuuh...."

"Gyahaha. You let your first and last chance escape."

Taking a look....

Izumu-kun was standing firmly on both legs in the hallway with a large, deep hole in it. Even though the sound of destruction that hit his ears should have been at a level that a normal human wouldn't be able to stand for a while, let alone think. What kind of semicircular canals does he have? Why didn't he lose his sense of balance with that explosive sound right next to him? Could it be that the structure of his body is actually different? If that's the case, it's ridiculous.

"But let's just say you're pretty good for an amateur."

"....."

He regained his calm and his composure, huh.

Good grief.....

Certainly... I let my chance escape. When Izumu-kun was going on his rampage, that was my one and only chance.

I was out of bullets now.

I was also out of ideas.

It's not like I had any plans in the first place, though.

".....That's enough now, isn't it?"

Izumu-kun said as he lowered both of his arms.

"Since you did your best with me as your opponent, with this *Man Eater* as your opponent, since you fought alone, even Yukariki won't blame you. So tell me the location of *Death Color*."

"....."

"Or is it that you don't know? Was knowing *Death Color*'s location just a lie that you made up?" Izumu-kun wondered. "No... that's not possible. If you did that... I would definitely kill you. If the *Death Colored Crimson* is as strong and as scary as the rumors say, she wouldn't do that."

"....."

Think.

Is there anything?

A means to overcome this worst situation. A way to fix this situation where it's already all over. A way to open this situation that has been completely closed.

If there was something that convenient.

I wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

You can't start life over. You can't, no matter how hard you try. If everything in my life could be done over again, it might have been very happy, but it would be too arrogant and convenient to wish for something like that.

For things like doing something over.

The result will still be the same.

".....To begin with, you're not the type of person to take revenge or avenge someone's death, are you? You have the face of someone who doesn't know joy or sorrow."

"Wha....."

"That's probably why Rizumu took a liking to you. You don't have any doubts about what you're doing now, do you? You can't calm down, right? You can't calm down at all, can you? Your body is trembling with excitement as if it wasn't your own, isn't it?"

Niounomiya Izumu said in a confident tone.

"I felt it the last two times we talked and when we were fighting just now, you're nothing. I don't feel anything from you. Not even hatred against me or even anger at the fact Yukariki was killed. I can't feel anything. You're not battle-crazed like me, it's like you're not fighting at all. Rather, it's like you're trying to win by running away. I don't understand, I don't understand, I don't understand at all. What the hell are you fighting me for?"

"....."

"You said you wanted to realize something earlier, but what was it that you wanted to realize? I don't get it. I don't feel like killing a weakling like you over such nonsense."

".....Certainly."

Certainly, I had no hatred towards Izumu-kun.

The truth is, I had neither anger nor resentment.

That would be unreasonable.

Izumu-kun was just doing his job. Hime-chan too, was just doing her job. There's no place for sadness and regret, or for anger and hatred.

In the first place.

A person's death is only theirs. When other people put emotion in it and make it become a mess it's just pathetic.

You shouldn't mix grief with anger.

You shouldn't mix grief with hatred.

That's dangerous.

Interminably dangerous.

".....It might be as you say."

"....."

".....If it's like that, I should have just obediently played the role of the narrator in a mystery novel... and left the role of the detective to Kunagisa...."

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's **stupid**!"

I....

Ran.

I climbed further up the stairs to the second floor.

".....Really! I reaaaally don't get you, fuck! Struggling like that is shameful!! Like a rabbit!"

Shouting, Izumu followed after me with such speed that you'd think he took no damage from my ramming attack and body press. This me who was injured all over wouldn't be able to escape for more than an instant.

But just that little bit was fine.

That little bit was fine, so....

".....Guh."

I reached the second floor, nearly twisting the ankle that was hit earlier (the pain multiplied and spread exponentially). Without hesitating or stopping, I turned. I had too much momentum, making it impossible for me to get into the first room, so I jumped into the one further back, the hospital room in which I had spent the night with Hime-chan, or rather the one in which a fool had spent the night alone.

I closed the door, slid straight into the bed, grabbed the top sheet which had been neatly made, and threw it spread out in the direction of the door with all my strength.....

The sound of the door opening.

"---------!?"

".....**Uaaaaaaaaaa**!"

I pulled out the knife I had put away again and with a howl, charged towards the spread out sheet, aiming at Izumu-kun who should be at the doorframe beyond the sheet.....

The knife's blade pierced through the sheet.

"....."

But....

There was no response.

The spread sheet closed up.

There was no sign of Izumu-kun on the other side.

Then I saw it.

Izumu-kun was stuck to the ceiling.

With his two legs.

He looked at me and laughed.

Didn't he mention that his leg strength wasn't half bad?

When he opened the door, he leaped towards the ceiling, bypassing the sheet.....

A triangle jump.

"----Gyahahaa!"

Then, after spinning in the air once, Izumu-kun stretched out his left leg and aimed for my heart. I promptly let go of the knife in the sheet and crossed my arms in front of my chest. Immediately after I crossed them, I heard the sound of my bones. Rather than breaking, it sounded more like they were crushed. I was blown away and slammed into the bed behind me.

I lost all sensation in my arms.

The ribs under my arms finally started to hurt. It seems that these were indeed broken. I was just barely able to notice.

"Haaaa... Gugu... kuh."

Even this wasn't Izumu-kun's full strength . That kick just now was only meant to be a threat, and as a means to close the distance between us. And with just that... my arms were crushed.

Yes, to keep me in check....

In check.

Of course, after a jab.

A straight is coming.

"Gyahahahahahahahahahaha! Hya----------hoo!"

With my back on the bed and both of my arms without any strength and spread loosely, I looked upwards, seeing Izumu-kun jump on the bed with his arms bent back in the shape of a bow.

Then.

With those arms.

"Gluttony!!"

Two strikes of *Eating One*.

He swung down.

The two shots were aimed at both sides of my head.

It was that kind of image.

My brain was shaken from both sides and I couldn't think about anything. The shocks didn't neutralize each other but instead synergized, making me feel like my brain cells were being liquified. The bed was completely destroyed at around two points, and as if sinking, as if sinking into a sea of debris, my back reached the floor of the hospital room.

".....Oh, dangerous, dangerous."

And then....

Izumu-kun opened his mouth.

"I instinctively almost aimed at you seriously, even though I shouldn't kill you."

"....."

My head was ringing. The shock waves wouldn't quite leave my body. It felt like every ounce of the water in my body was undulating. Those echoing waves made my damaged bones crack here and there.

"Careful."

Izumu-kun pulled out his arms that were stuck into the floor and took his body off the destroyed bed in an instant. There was no sign of injury on his hands.

It was like it was as usual for him.

"So... was it this one?"

An immense pain ran through my right leg, a pain that I had become all too familiar with. A little later, I heard what sounded like rubber snapping. To be honest, I don't really know which came first, the pain or the sound. Now that my body was hurting all over, it was hard to say that one more added pain had increased my suffering that much.

"For starters, I cut your Achilles tendon... If you want to recover, I think it'd be for the best that you didn't move," Izumu-kun explained honestly. "Both arms and both legs, with that you're out. So, what will you do?"

"What will I do you ask... Hey, *Man Eater*, do you still need more of a handicap?"

Izumu-kun completely ignored my bold front.

It's no good... I can't struggle anymore.

My strength was now... fixed.

"That's enough, Onii-san. Won't you start talking now? Where should I go to meet the *Death Color Crimson*?"

"....."

"Yes, yes, yes. By the way, how many ribs do humans have in total?" Izumu-kun slowly approached me. "Twelve on each side, that makes a total of twenty four. Gyahaha, that's quite a lot, isn't it? You already had two removed and three broken... 19 remain."

"....."

"How many do you want me to leave?"

Faster than I could respond, Izumu-kun moved his leg. I couldn't defend myself against it with my arms, so I took all of his toes.

"Nguh! Ugh....."

"One." Izumu-kun said. "Next, a second."

He was calm. He was completely calm.

With his legs that were the complete opposite of *Eating One*.

One by one, without any sound, he aimed at my ribs.

"Three, four, five... and a short pause."

"....."

I couldn't even scream or sob anymore. My whole body was in such pain that I didn't understand anything anymore. It was already unclear to me why I was in this situation.

For what exactly?

For who exactly?

How did it get like this?

"Do I continue? Do I stop? You choose."

"....."

"Ah, I'm begging you! That's enough already, isn't it?! Any more of this and your life really will be in danger! I hate not killing people! This kind of thing isn't my hobby!"

"....."

".....Okay, I'll continue."

Izumu-kun's actions resumed.

Ah.....

I wonder what it is.

I'm envious of these kinds of things.

Having a goal, working towards it.

Being able to kill me for a goal.

Being able to kill someone.

Murder.

"In the first place, there's no meaning to this," Izumu-kun said while continuing to act. "No matter how long you keep going, you can't kill me."

".....Can't kill."

"It's not because you can't use your arms and legs, you know? Earlier, when we were tangled at the bottom of those stairs, **you could have killed me**. But you couldn't, you couldn't kill me, that's why. In other words, you don't have the guts to kill me."

"....."

Not being able to kill.

I'm not... able to kill people.

I think killing them is bad.

Killing people is a sin.

Killing people is the worst.

That's why I've been holding back this whole time.

Even though I've thought about killing lots of people.

All my life, I've been holding back.

In reality... it might as well have been like I killed them. Many people died. Most of the people who wanted me dead have ended up dying, and most of the people who didn't want me dead have also ended up dying.

But it's not like I killed them directly.

That was the only theory that supported me.

It was a hope and a principle.

But I think.

If it's not direct, is it not murder?

Is it not murder to kill someone who's about to kill you? Then, if you get killed back when you try to kill someone back, is it not murder? That inverse. That exponential. It's like a Mobius strip going round in circles.

You must not kill people.

That's the absolute taboo.

If you break it, that's no good.

It's surely very, very bad.

That's why as long as you don't break it, it's a solid wall.

If you use a gun, it's much easier to kill people than with a sword. If you use poison, it's much easier to kill people than with a gun. If you use magic, it's probably easier to kill people than with poison. If you use words, it must be much easier to kill people than with magic.....

That's how, all this time, I have continued killing.

I have devoured all kinds of people.

I have been preying on all kinds of people.

Cannibalism (eating each other).

I used to think that this word was written as *cannibalism* (eating friends). Even now, half of me still thinks that.

No, actually.

From the bottom of my heart, truly.

At most, that's barking up the wrong tree....

"The Kiyomizu stage at the Kiyomizu Temple."

I said.

"The Kiyomizu stage at the Kiyomizu Temple."

".....Huh?"

"She's there. Aikawa-san. She'll be waiting for you until the sun rises."

".....Is that so?"

Izumu-kun pulled his leg back.

I wonder how many ribs I have left.

I was worried about such a thing.

The pain was so mixed up I couldn't tell what was hurting anymore. Won't you just become numb already? Quickly, become numb so that I can't feel anything anymore.

This pain.

This pain.

This pain.

I realize it enough already....

"Well then, I'll get going, but... should I call an ambulance?" Izumu-kun looked at my expression. "You probably can't even use your phone in that shape."

"Please," I answered. "I have a favorite hospital, so contact there....."

"Okay. What's the number?"

I told him the number.

I memorized it before coming here.

Because I thought it would definitely be necessary.

Izumu-kun used his own cell phone to call an ambulance. Even the aftercare is flawless. Professional killers these days provide a thorough service, so it's actually not a bad way to kill or be killed. Ah, but I wonder if Izumu-kun is going to retire from this business. If he's going into seclusion, that's probably his plan. I wonder if that's a waste or not. There's no point in thinking about it.

"It might be something pointless, but... this might not be something I'll get many chances to ask. In the end, you," Izumu-kun said after closing his cell phone. "What the hell did you really want to do? What did you even want to realize to end up in this state?"

"Hmm... I don't know."

"Is that so....." Izumu-kun seemed to have stopped trying to understand. Truly, it was a wise decision. "Then, I'll be going."

"Going where?"

"To that Kiyomizu Temple, of course."

"I don't think you should do that....."

After some hesitation, I decided to warn him. What happens next is none of my business, but I felt it was better to give a warning than not to.

"Aikawa-san is... merciless. Hime-chan was a precious friend to Aikawa-san, so....."

"Precious friend, huh."

"I know that... I truly know. That person probably... she probably killed Zerozaki Hitoshiki. If Rizumu-chan's investigation was correct and Zerozaki Hitoshiki was killed, then the one who killed Zerozaki Hitoshiki was Aikawa Jun," I mumbled. "I know it because I'm his alternative, I know it... That person, I don't know why, but... she has no mercy towards the residents of your world... excluding Hime-chan."

"Is that so. That's exactly what I want."

".....Why are you so obsessed with Aikawa-san?"

"It's my raison d'etre. Though, that's just what Mr. Fox told me. For me who specializes in *strength*, fighting against the strongest is necessary."

A raison d'etre.

A proof of existence.

For something like that.

For something so ridiculous.

Then, that would be....

The same as me.

"Even though you just got free, you'll head to your death?"

"It's fine. For me, freedom is only something *long-awaited*, so it's not something I'm attached to. And also, if you say that, for me, Rizumu is my precious little sister," Izumu-kun said happily. "Rizumu said she loved you."

".....Well, thanks."

"Nya. She's someone who's quick to fall in love, so don't mind it."

Izumu-kun laughed.

Well, I thought it was useless from the start. There was no way to stop it. There was already no way to stop the overwhelming battle between Niounomiya Izumu and Aikawa Jun. Aikawa-san surely won't be satisfied without settling things with Izumu-kun who killed Hime-chan. That's already a fated decision accompanied by an almost absolute certainty.

That's the unavoidable Story.

The Story.

I just... squeezed myself in.

Squeezed myself in and forcibly prolonged the Story, that's all.

It was just that.

"....."

I was in an unclear mood.

I couldn't think about anything.

I couldn't hear Izumu-kun's voice very well.

My consciousness... was fading.

Vaguely fading.

".....Izumu-kun, what are you going to do from now on?"

"Hmm, I don't know," Izumu-kun said while imitating my tone. "Just kidding. Well, for starters, I was thinking about starting to take back some of the weakness that I've been forcing on Rizumu this whole time."

"Hmm....."

"Strength is weakness and weakness is strength----that's why. In order to do that, first I have to receive an overwhelming defeat from the *Death Colored Crimson*, that's probably it... to *continue living after having lost*. It's surprisingly difficult."

"Then, Izumu-kun," I said while staring at the ceiling. I no longer had the strength to look at him. "If we have a connection....."

"Please spare me. I don't know about Rizumu, but... someone like you...."

Izumu-kun laughed.

He laughed just like Rizumu-chan.

".....I hate cunning bastards like you."

Then....

Without a sound, Izumu-kun walked out of the hospital room.

I couldn't see him off.

I continued to stare blankly at the ceiling.

Then, I sighed once.

".....I was hoping to hear that line from you."

As I muttered self-deprecatingly to myself.

The pain finally started to numb.

Even though I had little blood loss, that kick I received at the stairs might be bad. I don't even want to think about what kind of state my body is in right now. Honestly, looking back at my life, this was probably the first time my body has been damaged to this extent.

"Ah...."

Maybe I'll die like this.

Die.

I might die.

At that time, I remembered many things.

Things from way back.

About my sister, about my family, about my friends, about my friends' families. About six years ago, about the five years when I lived in Houston, about the friends I made there, about when I got back to Japan. About Houko-chan, about Moeta kun, about Miiko-san, about Suzunashi-san, about Ukigumo-san, about Koutoumaru, about Nanananami, and about Hime-chan. And about all the other people I've met since I came back to Japan. Some were enemies, some hated me, and some were good friends.

The residents of Wet Crow's Feathers island.

My classmates at the Rokumeikan University.

The girls at the Hanging High School.

The researchers at the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility.

And.

Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan.

It's not like they wanted to die, right?

The truth is, they had been waiting forever.

They waited.

Just that, really just that, they were probably not thinking about anything else. Just for that reason alone, Assistant Professor Kigamine continued to continue, and Kuchiha-chan continued to live.

They were probably prepared even for eternity.

Madly.

To the utmost limit.

So much that it made them want to die.

".....Well, that's that."

I closed my eyes.

The pain in my body was numbing and dissipating; rather, my eyes were starting to hurt. The ceiling had become hazy and I couldn't see very well. Everything I saw was blurry. Was it because the inside of my head wasn't clear? My eyes were blazing hot. My eyes hurt. My eyes hurt. They didn't take a direct hit, but the ripples of the last two blows must have had a deep-rooted effect on me.

So I closed my eyes.

I'm starting to feel sleepy....

Let's just fall asleep like that.

I don't know if I'm going to wake up tomorrow.

That too will depend on the Story to come.

If I'm not going to die, I won't die, no matter what.

If I'm going to die here, then that would be it.

No matter how much I struggle, it's useless.

After all, it's not like I have anything I want to do.

I have neither hopes nor wishes.

That's why it's fine either way.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

Do as you like.

It's always been like this.

I don't even know if I'm alive or dead.

Vague and unclear, half-assed and hazy, not choosing anything and letting myself go along with other people, I've led an uncertain and ambiguous life, that's why....

"....I don't want to die...."

Like that.

I realized that I was alive.

I learned at what moments I cried.

EPILOGUE — MIDSUMMER NIGHT DREAM

ME (NARRATOR)
PROTAGONIST

Height, 138 cm, weight 32 kg (estimated). Three sizes, after having just begun going through puberty, naturally that's a secret. Bobbed hair and skin so abnormally white that it looked like snow. Only her lips were strangely red. She was like a doll, her appearance looked like a profound taoist beauty. Her blood type was O, Rh minus. Her birthday is the 16th of April, so she is thirteen years old. She lived in Hokkaido until the age of ten, but ran away from home for personal reasons and moved to Kyoto with her half-brother, who is two years older than her. She's a vegetarian who doesn't eat meat. She hates the smell of tobacco smoke more than anything. Her hobby is killing lower life forms. Her favorite spot is Kamogawa Park (obviously, her targets are the ducks and pigeons). As she is a runaway, she doesn't go to middle school, but her intellectual curiosity seems normal for her age, and she goes to the library every day.

That was Yamiguchi Houko's profile.

"Sometimes I wonder if Nonsense User Onii-chan actually lives at the hospital and just comes to visit the apartment once in a while."

Houko-chan said so while peeling an apple with a butterfly knife she handled with a familiar hand. The detached peel fell into a metal bowl that sat on top of her white thighs. Houko-chan was wearing a red dress and sandals with a thin bottom, really making it feel like it was the height of summer. She wasn't wearing any accessories and her fashion was simple overall, but it wasn't because she lacked taste, it's just that Houko-chan has an overprotective brother. However, looking at Houko-chan who was sitting on a steel pipe chair beside the bed, it seemed that the simplicity of her outfit suited her better than if she dressed up in some strange way, and it's not like I don't understand Moeta-kun's feelings.

"Onii-chan, it's no exaggeration to say that you have spent half your life in this hospital room."

"It's an exaggeration. Don't talk about people like they have a frail body."

"Even if you say that, this is the fifth time Nonsense User Onii-chan has went to the hospital since coming to Kyoto."

"It's only five times in six month. That's not that much."

"It's a lot."

"Is it a lot?"

"That's frequent."

In the meantime, Houko-chan finished peeling the apple, which was as red as her lips. While I was watching her handle the apple, I learned that the trick to skinning it smoothly was to hold the knife in place and rotate the apple. I thought that she was going to give me that apple, but Houko-chan just started to peel it without moving the knife.

August 22nd.

Originally, this was the day I should have started my part-time job.

I was in a hospital in Kyoto.

Or rather, I was unconscious until yesterday. According to the doctors, I was seriously wandering the boundary between life and death. Today, I finally regained my consciousness, so visits became possible, and the first one to come was Houko-chan.

"So, how long will you be in the hospital this time?"

"Two months until complete recovery... one month until being discharged."

"So you'll be spending half of your summer vacation in the hospital."

Houko-chan giggled. She's usually a very honest and nice girl, so why does she sometimes speak in such a strange and cheeky way?

".....Well, that's right," I admitted reluctantly. "But it seems there won't be any lasting effects. The broken bones and the detached bones were just simple fractures. There's no dietary restrictions either."

"Is that so?"

Houko-chan looked at me on the bed from head to toe, as if licking my body.

"But it's too funny."

"Don't say it so clearly....."

"It lacks too much elegance."

"Don’t say it so indirectly....."

Casts on both my arms and legs.

A corset on my torso.

Gauze on my face.

That’s how I looked currently.

Needless to say, it was too ugly to imagine.

Still... after having had my body injured to such a degree, to have no lasting effects means that he really is a professional killer with perfect aftercare. Even though he mercilessly broke my bones here and there, my nerves were intact, and my Achilles tendon stuck back perfectly too, so the problem was the damage to the internal organs, but that too wasn’t serious enough that an operation had to be done. That didn’t change the fact that I had been wandering between life and death, but in this case, that’s probably appropriate.

By the way, I had five ribs left.

"I was sleepy last time, so I didn’t get to hear the details, but Onii-chan, what exactly happened this month?"

"Ah...." Was it because she was sleepy? "Well, there were lots of things, a lot happened. Did you hear about Hime-chan? Yeah, but with my hospitalization, everything has been solved for the time being...."

"Is that so. Then it’s fine."

While talking, Houko-chan continued making progress with the apple. Unlike radishes, apples have a lot of water, so they require more skill to peel, but Houko-chan wasn’t even looking at her hands.

".....How is everyone at the apartment doing?"

"As usual. Putting Hime-nee-sama aside, Onii-chan going to the hospital is an ordinary thing, so it doesn’t affect our daily lives at all."

"I see....."

"Let’s see... I’ve got one bad news and one good news."

"Let’s hear the good news."

"Mii-nee-san got the scroll she wanted."

"Huh?" I asked back without thinking. Right, come to think of it, you could say that was the cause of everything. "....How? Did she find a good job? No, getting such a convenient job that quickly...."

"She won the lottery."

Houko-chan said without any emotion.

"Third prize, 500,000 yen."

".....Really?"

"Really."

"....."

That reminds me, she said something like that.

What a thing. It's optimistic, or she has good luck, or how should I say it, there was no need for me to do anything. No, that's false. It's not like that. In other words... it means that, from the beginning, Miiko-san would have gotten that scroll no matter what happened. No matter how the flow was twisted, no matter what a side character like me did, it all had coherence in the end, and it reached its destination.

That kind of story.

Was that Miiko-san's story?

Certainly.....

For that person, that kind of story is appropriate.

"What's wrong? Nonsense User Onii-chan. You look like you have something on your mind."

"No... not really. And the bad news?"

"Yes. Kasugai-san left the apartment last night."

"Yes?" I was a little surprised. "Wasn't she supposed to move to Hime-chan's room? That person."

"Who knows... It seemed useless to try to stop her, and Onii-chan was in a coma so I couldn't inform you, so I let her do what she wanted... Should I have stopped her?"

"No....." I shook my head. "That's the kind of person she is. It's a shame that I wasn't able to say goodbye to her, but there's nothing we can do. She only goes in the direction the wind is blowing."

"I have a message from Kasugai-san."

"Huh."

"'I will never forget the sweetness of the nights we spent together.'"

"....."

In the end, she left while harassing me.

"'The sweetness of the nights,' what does that mean? Did something happen between Kasugai-san and Onii-chan?"

"Umm....."

What are you saying to kids, you parasite.

Don't ever come again.

"In the end, why did she even come here... for having stayed one month, she didn't really do anything."

"There's no need to think that deeply about it. She just simply wanted to play with Onii-chan, didn't she?"

"If that's the case, then 'with Onii-chan' is a mistake."

Without paying any mind to my objection, she continued, "Because Onii-chan is popular with abnormal people." It was a hard point to deny, so I just let it slide with a "Maybe, maybe."

"Then that would mean she's quite cute, Kasugai-san. Disappearing while Onii-chan is in the hospital. In that sense, Hime-nee-sama was probably like that too. Hime-nee-sama's affection for Onii-chan wasn't half-hearted."

"Hmm? Ah, no, no, that's not it. Hime-chan said she had someone else she liked."

".....Is that so."

"What? What's with that weird pause?"

"No, nothing. Anyway, Nonsense User Onii-chan. So again, there's one room left open."

"Ah... Hime-chan's room was originally Ukigumo-san's room, wasn't it? Or was it Nanananami's?"

"If I remember correctly, Ukigumo-san was Hime-nee-sama's predecessor."

"Is that right... I wonder who's going to come next."

"It'll probably stay empty for a while. Moeta and I are going to use it effectively."

After having made the body of the apple quite slim, Houko-chan finally stopped moving her hands. She snapped the knife closed and spun it around before putting it away in her dress pocket. She then picked up the end of the strip of apple that had piled up in the bowl and brought it to her mouth.

.....So you're going to eat it?

"Well, Nonsense User Onii-chan, leave the apartment to me and use this as an opportunity to slowly heal." Houko-chan smiled creepily while eating the smooth apple('s peel). "I'll visit you again when I'm free."

"Please do....."

"By the way, Nonsense User Onii-chan. I heard it from Mii-nee-san, but... that hair, you had Hime-nee-sama cut it for you?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Sorry about cutting it without telling you."

"It's not something that can be resolved with just an apology."

"....."

She didn't forgive me.

No mercy, huh.

"It's fine. It'll quickly grow back anyway... Next time, I'll ask Houko-chan. My hair grows fast. It always has. When I was about your age, it had grown to my waist. I had it in a thick braid."

"Is that so?"

She didn't seem interested.

It seems she didn't like men who talk about their past.

"Thanks for the food."

Having eaten the apple in the bowl down to the skin, Houko-chan stood up from her chair.

"Then, Nonsense User Onii-chan, I plan to stop by the library on my way back, so I should be going now."

"Okay. Be careful on the way home."

"I'll come visit you again tomorrow or the day after. At that time, do you want me to bring the books you like... Ah."

"That's right," she said. Houko-chan took off the knapsack she was carrying and placed it on the chair. She then searched inside and took out a reasonably sized paper bag.

"Here. It seems it's a present from Witch Onee-san to Nonsense User Onii-chan. I completely forgot I had it."

"Hmm.....?"

That doesn't sound like Nanananami.

Tilting my head, I opened the paper bag, wondering if it was some kind of trap. What was inside was a machine that I've never seen before. A black body. But it wasn't made of a strong material, it seemed kind of cheap. It had a screen and buttons on both sides. Hmm, judging from the size and how it looks, it's probably a portable game console or something like that, but there was no place to put a cartridge in. No, looking closely, there was a slit above the screen that looked like a card reader. Does it read the information from the card here?

"What's this? It's not an Advance... is it?"

"It's a Barcode Battler. It seems to be the most hip and popular item among kids right now. Let's see, that console is the second version."

"Barcode.....?"

"To put it simply, it's a device that lets you scan barcodes in that slit, convert the barcode numbers into combat abilities, and then play against each other."

"Hmm. Strange things are in fashion these days... I didn't know about it."

"I also didn't know. But you know, Witch Onee-san is sensitive to these trends."

"That's true. I don't like praising her, but I must at least admit that." I took a good look at the frame. "But the fact there are fights means that it's a game for two people, right? It seems to have that style, so I can't play it in a private room. And I can't really play with the doctors."

"She said you can also play by yourself. Here, I have the game manual." Houko-chan took out another bundle of paper. It was handwritten, so it must not be the original manual. It seemed to be Nanananami's own creation (that freak). "It's apparently a big boom that's turning over the world, so it's quite a hard toy to get. She said that you needed to thank her."

"She really doesn't change... Even if the world was destroyed, regardless of how the Story turned out, she really would just say, 'As if I cared about that.' It really, really, really goes without saying that I don't want to become like that, but I can't hide my respect."

But, well, it's certainly not bad material for killing time. I was thinking of passing this month by just reading books, but playing with this for a bit might not be bad. I can't say anything until I've read the manual to understand what kind of game it is, though.

.....It won't explode or anything, right?

"Onee-san also prepared another console called the Virtual Boy, but apparently, 'It's too new for Inosuke so he probably won't be able to use it.'"

"Hmm. She really makes it sound like I'm behind on trends."

"Then, I'll go now."

Houko-chan said, and just as she was putting her knapsack on her back again...

"Yoo-hoo!"

The sliding door facing my bed in the hospital room opened with incredible force and a nurse carrying a tray of food entered in like a skilled waitress.

"Ii~, it's been a long time, it's time to eat!"

"....." "....."

"It's Ii~'s favorite, hospital food!"

"....." "....."

No, I definitely don't eat hospital food because I like it.

I mean, even you are gonna reappear?

I didn't expect that.

The nurse, who was wearing a short skirt and white stockings in clear violation of the dress code, approached the bed and put the tray down on the table in a fluid motion. She's someone that's foolish on both the outside and the inside, but at least she does her job efficiently. As one would expect from someone wearing glasses (irrelevant).

"No... but you know, it's really been a while. It's been nearly two whole months since Ii~ has been to the hospital, so Onee-san was worried!"

".....That's....."

Thanks for that, really.

I didn't realize you were worried about me not coming to the hospital.

"Hmm? Oh dear, oh dear. Ii~ mustn't be underestimated, nya. That..." The nurse looked sharply at Houko-chan, who had frozen because of the sudden intruder (more precisely, Houko-chan had one hand in the pocket of her dress and entered into combat preparation). "That's quite a cute girl that came to visit you! Uwa, really cute! What is this girl?! Ii~, that's not fair! With that loli girl! In this room with only one bed! What have you two been doing all alone in this locked room?! Ah, really, you Humbert Humbert!"

"Who are you?"

Do I really have to deal with this high tension pervert during my hospitalization?

I reached towards the bowl of food with my arms which were difficult to move because of the cast. The situation with my legs is quite delicate, so I can't move them carelessly, but the fractures in my arms are around my ulnae, so as long as I restrain myself, they shouldn't impact my daily life.

"Kyaa, really pretty! Truly lyrical! What's your name, little miss? Tell it to Onee-san, please!"

"Yamiguchi Houko," Houko-chan said and slightly bowed her head. She took her hand away from her pocket, so it seems her caution had lessened. "Thank you for the compliment."

"Nya? Yamiguchi?" The nurse tilted her head. "……Nyan. How should I put it, it's unique… or rather, it's a strange name. Are you sure it's not Sekiguchi? Well, you're cute, so I forgive you. Moe! Hey, hey, Houko-chan, what's your relationship with this unfriendly big brother?"

"Sex friend."

I spit out the miso soup I was about to drink.

Even the nurse had frozen.

Time in that hospital room had frozen.

Well, wait… calm down, become calm. This phenomenon… it may be an attack from an enemy stand!

"Is something the matter?"

Houko-chan tilted her head in wonder.

"……Houko-chan… forgive this weakling and coward for answering a question with another question, but in which dungeon did you acquire such vocabulary?"

"Witch Onee-san told me. If someone asked me about my relationship with Onii-chan, that's what I should answer."

"……"

As I thought, it was that witch….

I'll need to settle this with her someday.

"Is it bad?"

"Yeah… very much." I shook my head powerlessly. "Even I technically have something called a life, you see."

"Ah, but don't worry," Houko-chan laughed. "I've only said that to about ten people."

My life…….

My life... where is it going?

".....Houko-chan. I'm going to say this for your sake, but I don't think you should use words that you don't know."

"Okay. But then, what should I say when I receive such a question from now on?"

"Well obviously, since we haven't done anything strange, you can just answer normally and say 'we're friends.'"

"We did it."

"Wh-what!?"

Th-that's impossible.

I shouldn't have yet done anything unethical or perverse with Houko-chan. Because I'm the type to save the dessert until the end... Wait, that's not it.

Houko-chan smiled mischievously at me.

"As expected of Witch Onee-san. The plan of getting Onii-chan to call me a friend worked perfectly. I'm really happy."

"....."

"Well then. If there's anything I can do for you, please feel free to call me at any time."

Saying that, she passed by me and the nurse (who was still frozen in place) and headed for the door. When she slid the door to the side, she around and,

"Ah, and also."

She said.

"I at least know what sex means. I may have no experience, but I'm still a girl."

"....."

"Then, good health, friendship, and reunion."

Houko-chan went out into the hallway and the door automatically slid shut. The hospital room went back to being plunged in silence, but eventually the nurse picked up her cap which had fallen off and fixed the position of her glasses, then after shrugging,

"She got me."

She twisted her lips and looked at me.

"She's really cute, that girl."

".....Well, yes."

"It looks like she's going to die around next month."

"What are you talking about?"

It was a severely serious topic.

The nurse sat down on the chair where Houko-chan was sitting with a "Heave-ho."

"It's been a long time, but Ii~... Did you become more manly?"

".....Is that sarcasm because half of my face is covered in gauze?"

"No, it's not that. Your demeanour became more manly."

"Let me see... yes," I answered a bit jokingly. "Well, I overcame the death of a comrade and grew as a person, I guess."

"Huh."

She didn't seem to care.

It seems she just wanted to say it.

"....."

"Hmm? What's up? What's with that silence?"

".....Nothing."

"Is it a mating signal?"

"No."

Hmm.

Well, that's right.

It's embarrassing and bothersome, but I have no choice.

It's something like a ritual.

Even something trivial seems valuable.

"Miss nurse, are you fine with the usual quiz?"

"Hmm? Yeah, it's fine. What is it?"

She had a curious look on her face.

Right, it's better to let someone else do the stuff you don't want to do.

"The time is a night long ago, the place is somewhere not here, for reasons, five people gathered there...."

I briefly explained this case's circumstances to the nurse. The straitjacket under the manteau, the double personality of the professional killer and the great detective, the siblings who were one as a pair and a pair as one. The bodyguard string technique user. The girl who won't die and the continuing assistant professor. And an incompetent user of nonsense. When he woke up in the morning, four of them were dead... and only one survived.

Haplessly, he survived.

He lived.

".....Hmm. This time's quiz isn't a locked room. Aaaaah, boring."

"Is it boring?"

"Yes. Because recently, I've become a locked room enthusiast."

"Haa....."

"They call me the woman who remembers the number of locked rooms she's read about. Well, it's fine, um." The nurse held her head a moment. This time, she seemed to be a bit troubled. "So, this pathetic and uncool idiot who survived, he's not the killer, right?"

".....Yes."

I didn't use such horrible terms.

"Hmm. Hmmm. No outsiders?"

"None."

"Then there's only one answer," The nurse said matter-of-factly. "It wasn't a double personality, but twins, right?"

".....Correct."

"If they're twins, then essentially, they possess *the same body*, so it's simple to act as someone with a double personality, isn't it? To the extent that if they're skilled, it won't be seen through at first. Imagine two people with the same body, whether they do detective work or killing, there's nothing more handy than that. It's impossible to put on a straitjacket and manteau alone, but when there are two of you, you can put them on and off as you

please. That also means there's no problem with driving the motorcycle. And also, that string technique user, even if she's a strong girl, even if you can't win against her in a one on one, with a two on one the odds become better."

"Yes... that's right."

That's the Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

Niounomiya siblings.

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

The naming is also a trick.

Identical twins of different sexes are impossible, so if they appear with the same body, you'll end up believing their words. Even Izumu-kun... even though he said *big brother*, his body is still the same as Rizumu-chan's, it doesn't change the fact that it's the body of a little girl.

The double personality was a fabricated fake.

I had never imagined something like making it seem that two people were in fact a double personality, but simply thinking about it, there are many other advantages to it beside what the nurse just said. First is the body double. If Rizumu-chan is at the front, then Izumu-kun will be at the *back* and he can sneak around freely. And... not just that. If Rizumu-chan was only in charge of the *weakness*, that inevitably leaves a bad taste.

Izumu-kun described Rizumu-chan as a puppet.

Puppet (alternative).

Substitute (alternative).

Body double (alternative).

"Aside from the double personality being twins, I think the rest of it is pretty much the same as what Iuzmu explained." That's what Aikawa-san said during the discussion. "And... like that *Fragment* Ichihime talked about, Izumu can probably remotely control Rizumu to some extent. That would explain what happened when you passed Rizumu by the stairs that night."

Right....

A byproduct of *Frament*, she said.

The empty Rizumu-chan.

The hollow Rizumu-chan.

Puppet.

Autonomous radio control.

That was... not a metaphor, not pedantry, not self-effacement, its meaning was exactly as it was. The personality given to her body was severely and arbitrarily lacking. And it was at the will of Izumu-kun.

He could control it.

Like that night.

Like a puppet.

A puppet given a transient personality.

She was programmed with the bare minimum personality that was so hopelessly lacking she didn't question her consciousness vanishing or the fact that she was wearing that kind of clothing under her manteau.

Even Hosuke Sharaku wasn't like that.

Niounomiya Izumu as an absolute professional killer that eliminated *weakness* in every sense of the word and specialized only in *strength*, and Niounomiya Rizumu as the spare. Nioinomiya Rizumu was the caretaker of the spare body. The reason why Izumu-kun sympathized so much with Rizumu-chan had become clear to me.

"But... one of the two died in that fight."

"That would be it. But the math works out. The truth is that there were six people and two of them survived, so that uncool and pathetic idiot doesn't have to be the culprit. Naturally, the body in the adjacent hospital room was the spare little sister."

The beheaded corpse of Rizumu-chan. That was the work of Hime-chan's *string techniques*. The one who pierced a hole in her chest and **took her heart** was probably Izumu-kun, though.

Heart.

Rizumu-chan's heart.

The proof of being alive.

"....."

The fact that the two of them were considered to be a double personality is certainly something that the *Strategist*, Hagihara Shiogi, would be able to easily see through without any trouble, that's why it was a prerequisite that Shiogi-chan and the Niounomiya siblings didn't fight directly. The fact that she knew about the Niounomiya siblings without having met them directly was the deciding factor. However, in this exceptional case, that kind of trick would be difficult to see through for most people, including me, unless if it were accidentally used in a way that greatly deviated from its intended use.

It's simple and therefore difficult to solve.

It's not logic.

What you need is a leap of logic.

A spur of the moment idea.

It's not even a process of elimination.

"....."

But that doesn't mean that the trick the Niounomiya siblings played was an excellent one.

Rather, it's the opposite.

Ephemeral.

It was hopelessly ephemeral.

Really, well said.

I'm a professional killer contracted by order

With fourteen holy crosses at my side, I begin executing my errand.

The Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe.....

What exactly do they think of humans?

"Well, in the first place, multiple personalities aren't that recognized in medicine. That professional killer thinks his partner died. Now, if I leave this corpse and run away somewhere, I'll be free! Since he normally passes for someone with a double personality, only a few would know the truth of his

existence, probably only his relatives. In the eyes of the world, he's dead, so he can enter into a life of seclusion. Even if that meant leaving behind his sister's corpse...."

"The *heart* is always near, huh?"

The truth is probably not that romantic. Izumu-kun wasn't the kind of person who liked such fantasies. If I told him that, he'd probably just laugh in my face. If it was only that, it'd be fine, but knowing Izumu-kun, he might get angry.

But... not everything was calculated.

Izumu-kun lost his sister.

Even if she was just a replacement for the system, I know that she wasn't just a mere replacement for Izumu-kun because of the fact that he called out to me in that courtyard, even though he was risking the collapse of the system itself.

I'm sure at that time, Izumu-kun was...

Bored.

Of killing.

And probably of living.

Yeah... that's right.

Maybe that act was just a spur of the moment thought for Izumu-kun. It may have been the kind of fleeting, fragile, wandering thing that you didn't think of until a second before and ended up forgetting the second after.

Everything.

In the end, when you get to the bottom of it, that's how it is.

"Something like that. The quiz is critically lacking in information, so it's impossible to get into the details, but it can't be helped.. How's that for the time being?"

"Yes... as expected of you."

"Ehehe."

Ta-dah, the nurse stuck out her chest.

I ended up putting her in a good mood, huh?

"Ah, sorry, I have work, work. Ii~, is that all?"

"Eh, well, yes. I don't have much of an appetite."

"I see. Then I'll clean that up." The nurse promptly put the bowl back on the tray. "Well then, best regards for the coming month, Ii~."

"....."

One month.

That's a chilling thought.

In a situation where I can barely move, having this pervert hold the power over my life and death.....

".....Um, miss nurse (in training)."

"Hey, I'm a nurse (registered). I'll sue you for sexual harassment."

"Could you tell me your name? For some reason... I think we're going to have a long relationship."

"Hmm? You don't know? I think I told you my name when we first met."

"I might have heard it, but I forgot."

"What a bad memory you have."

The nurse crossed her arms as if she was fed up.

"Well, it's fine. My name is Katanashi Rabumi."

"Katanashi... Rabu?"

"Rabumi. Hihi, it's a girly name, isn't it?"

"No... Yes, it is."

I mean, it's not a human name.

I can't think it's the name of someone who will stay a side character.

".....What were your parents doing?"

"Eh? Hey, hey, that's shameless. If you want to know more details about me, you'll have to enter the hospital route and advance on to the Rabumi scenario."

"There's no such thing."

"Kamaitachi no Yoru?"

"Shut up, you idiot!"

"Nyahaha! Well then."

After the nurse put her hands on her hips and struck a pose like a hero of justice, she slid the door and left the hospital room.

……

Sometimes I wonder if there are only crazy people in this world.

Everyone is crazy.

Ill, broken.

Probably from the structure itself.

"I'll just have to give up and think it's that kind of story... It's a cruelly unreasonable story."

Taking Miiko-san's example, it may just be that you reap what you sow, and that it's just karma.

Because I'm crazy, everyone around me is crazy. Because I'm the worst, everyone around me is the worst. How can a compass with the wrong coordinates draw a correct map?

Ah, that's right.

Miiko-san.

What should I do about Miiko-san?

At this rate, I won't be able to go back to the apartment for awhile... it's a bit of a shameful story. If she came to visit me, what kind of face should I meet her with?

An unsightly figure.

An unsightly result.

Shameful.

Really, there's a limit to how shameful one can be.

"Izumu-kun... I wonder what happened to him."

Three days have passed since then.

Death Colored Crimson VS. Man Eater.

The result of that had already come out long ago.

He said he was tired of killing.

Being raised as a killer... is that really possible for a personality created to be a killer? Can a weapon created only to kill, only to massacre, have a change of heart?

.....I'm sure it's possible.

There are some who get tired of living.

There are some who get tired of themselves.

There are some who forget that they're living.

There are some who want to forget that they're living.

There were also some who didn't know.

Hime-chan... what about her?

Was I able to remember correctly?

My meeting with Hime-chan.

I met Hime-chan.

I think there was only that meaning. Without an alternative, I think there was only that meaning. But even if that was the case for me, what about Hime-chan? For Hime-chan, did meeting me have any meaning? Did something change for Hime-chan as a result of meeting me? Did the fact that she met me and no one other than me have a meaning for her?

Hime-chan cried many times in front of me.

I hurt Hime-chan many times.

Unconsciously, but sometimes intentionally.

Was I able to give her something for that?

Was I able to do something in return?

I don't know, but.

".....Surprisingly, it's something that I don't know myself."

Hime-chan's words.

I see, what an odd thing to say.

It's truly... exquisite

Then maybe I won't know for the rest of my life.

Only on this issue, there's no dependable contractor who will appear dashingly at the very end and give the answer to everything. It's my problem, my question, and my own opponent, so it's best to answer it myself.

But I'm sure.

Since that June... Hime-chan was alive.

If that's the case, my existence wasn't in vain.

My meeting with Hime-chan wasn't in vain.

There was salvation.

As Izumu-kun said, she, Yukariki Ichihime, may have killed too many to live... That might also be reaping what you sow, karma....

Even so.

Even so, Yukariki Ichihime was still living.

Her own story.

".....Her own, her own and only her own story, huh."

Story.

Suddenly, those words.

I remembered the words of the fox-masked man.

In this case, he was wandering around on the outer frame from before it started to until after it ended, but in the end, he didn't step into the center of the Story. While having a deep connection with Assistant Professor Kigamine, Kuchiha-chan, Rizumu-chan, and Izumu-kun, the fox-masked man didn't have anything to do with the actual incident. Unlike me, he was satisfied with being an observer from start to finish. Being the cause of the cause, and directing the stage of the stage.....

He was satisfied with just knowing the truth.

Even those two *Cannibals*... he only thought of them as effective and replaceable proxies. Even the undying girl was regarded by him as merely a passing point.

"Aikawa-san's, huh....."

As far-fetched as it sounds, it's not unthinkable. Rather, it makes a lot of sense if you think about it. The similarity between the two that made you feel the distortion, and also the differences between the two that made you feel the distortion.

But I haven't told Aikawa-san about it yet. Even when we met at the Kyoto Imperial Palace, I didn't dare mention the circumstances around him. The existence of the fox-masked man was completely erased in front of Aikawa-san. It's not like I was putting on airs, it's not like I was feeling guilty from touching upon Aikawa-san's past without her consent. But still, I didn't say a word to Aikawa-san about the fox-masked man's existence or that I knew him.

I felt more disgusted at myself than guilty for doing that.

But I just couldn't bring myself to say it.

It's not that I didn't say it, I couldn't say it.

I was... just scared.

The fox-masked man.

I was just scared of that man.

That abnormal, no matter what faces he had.....

I didn't want to get involved.

My enemy.

Now that he has declared that, I wonder if that fox-masked man has something laid out for me. If that's the case, should I accept his challenge? It's too much, it's too ridiculous. Even if he said that it's the Story's plot, I really just can't accept it.

With a fear like death.

With that Worst.

I wonder how we should face each other.....

".....I wonder what's going to happen from now on....."

Nothing has changed.

No one has changed.

I haven't changed.

Not being involved with anyone or anything.
I was hoping that time would just pass lazily.
But that's impossible.
Living is a series of changes and transformations.
A series of ramifications and complications converging towards death.
I haven't lived long enough to get tired of living.
Rather, I was tired of dying.
The Story doesn't matter too much.
But since that's all there is to it....

We are alive.

Bye bye.
Farewell.
Goodnight.
Thank you.

"Do not eat, need we say more?" is the END.

AFTERWORD

"Huh, maybe if I continue to live, I'll die?" I think that every person has been confronted with this question, but when I had bumped into it as a relatively young book author, "Absurd, absurd, there's no way people die!" I had closed the question with that stupid conclusion. And, it's obvious, but humans can die. They will die for sure one day. It feels like "What are you saying?" but it seems it's something that's already decided. It's not even decent. It's not a joke. Even if the person in charge came out, that person in charge will eventually die. No matter how much you stretch out your life expectancy or how much you lower the probability of death, day by day, living through a day in itself is apparently like augmenting the possibility of dying. So, if there was a box where inside there were winning lottery tickets, and the ratio between winning and losing was about forty thousand to one so that even if you drew one ticket each day you'd still end up losing, even then the fact that, day by day, people are living with unreliable and unfounded ways to win like "The tickets on that side seem to be the winning ones." or "The ones on the top aren't mixed, so they're dangerous." and mere consolations like "Normally you don't draw that kind of thing." is something sad. When you die you'll die, even if you get hit by a meteorite. Lottery is a gamble, but if the chances to win are low enough, then it's no longer gambling, or something like that.

Further talk would just be sloppy and have no correlation with the characters appearing in this book, but the key person of the book, Madoka Kuchiha, is an immortal girl. Even though there was a first person narrator, since it's something that's also written elsewhere, it's true with a 99 percent certainty. But if the meanings of the established words "life" and "death" aren't steady, then I'm worried, even though it's other people's affairs. Well, if you were to say that the Niounomiya siblings were just an entity that divided the *strength* and *weakness* that was originally one into two, to begin with, they were just bridges that failed to lead the narrator that is the

nonsense using protagonist to his death, and they weren't even living properly. It seems like only characters whose problems weren't things like living or dying had appeared. It's not like the book isn't wobbling, really I don't know what karma led to things ending up like this, but like that the final boss appeared, it was *Cannibal Magical: The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic*.

Now, as for editor in charge Ooda Katsushi-sama and illustrator in charge Take-san, I would like to do the usual acknowledgments, but I'm beginning to run out of variations of how to thank them. I no longer know what to say, but even if I run out of words to thank them with, my feeling of gratitude won't run out. So that the love for my readers doesn't run out, this unworthy me will continue to write decent texts. Well then, if we have a connection, I would like to see you again.

Nisio Isin

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RADICAL
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Uprooted Radical (First) Thirteen Stairs

Nisio Isin

Price: Physical 1080 yen (tax included)

"Yo - my enemy."

To end the *world* and the *Story, the fox masked man* whispered those words to I/The Nonsense User/Ii-chan. The keyword is acceleration. And, the world's end. More than anything, the Story's end.

What could there be on the other side of the assassins in ambush, *Thirteen Stairs*-!?

The definitive last entry of the *Zaregoto Series*.

The prelude of the three books long last movement, *Uprooted Radical*, will finally play out!

Complete ignition, Nisio Isin!!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AKAGAMI IRIA	LADY
HANDA REI	HEAD MAID
CHIGA AKARI	TRIPLET MAID, ELDEST DAUGHTER
CHIGA HIKARI	TRIPLET MAID, MIDDLE DAUGHTER
CHIGA TERUKO	TRIPLET MAID, YOUNGEST DAUGHTER
IBUKI KANAMI	ARTIST
SASHIRONO YAYOI	COOK
HIMENA MAKI	FORTUNE-TELLER
SONOYAMA AKANE	SCHOLAR
SAKAKI SHINYA	ATTENDANT
ATEMIYA MUIMI	STUDENT
USAMI AKIHARU	STUDENT
EMOTO TOMOE	STUDENT
AOII MIKOKO	STUDENT
SASA SASAKI	DETECTIVE
IKARUGA KAZUHITO	DETECTIVE
SHISEI YUMA	ZIG ZAG
HAGIHARA SHIOGI	STRATEGIST
SAIJOU TAMAMO	INSATIABLE
ORIGAMI NOA	DIRECTOR
SHADOU KYOUICHIROU	RESEARCHER
OOGAKI SHITO	ASSISTANT
UZE MISACHI	SECRETARY
KOUTARI HINAYOSHI	RESEARCHER
NEO FURUARA	RESEARCHER
MIYOSHI KOKOROMI	RESEARCHER
KASUGAI KASUGA	RESEARCHER
UTSURIGI GAISUKE	GREEN GREEN GREEN
HINEMOSU SUZU	DOUBLE FLICK
GOTOODOROKI SEIGO	REVERSE CROSS
MUNEFUYU MUTSUKI	CUBIC LOOP
NADEKIRI HAKURAKU	DANCING WITH MADNESS
AYAMINAMI HYOU	CHEETAH
SHIKIGISHI KISHIKI	BAD KIND
SHIGAI TOUNO	TRIGGER HAPPY-END
KIGAMINE YAKU	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA	EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT
MIOUNOMIYA IZUMU	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOUNOMIYA RIZUMU	GREAT DETECTIVE
ASANO MIIKO	SWORDSMAN
YUKARIKI ICHIHIME	GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO	GIRL
ISHINAGI MOETA	GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU	DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI	WITCH
ISHIMARU KOUTA	GREAT THIEF
ZEROZAKI HITOSHIKI	DEMONIC KILLER
KAJOU AKIRA	SECOND
ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI	SPACE CREATOR
EMOTO SONOKI	DOCTOR
UTAGE KUDAN	IMAGINARY WEAPON
FURUYARI ZUKIN	SWORDSMITH
TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU	THOUGHT MANIPULATOR
MIGISHITA RURERO	PUPPETEER
YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU	ASSASSIN
MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NOISE	DISSONANCE
KINO RAICHI	POISON USER
OMOKAGE MAGOKORO	ORANGE SEED
SAITOU TAKASHI	WORST
AIKAWA JUN	RED
KUNAGISA TOMO	BLUE
I (NARRATOR)	PROTAGONIST

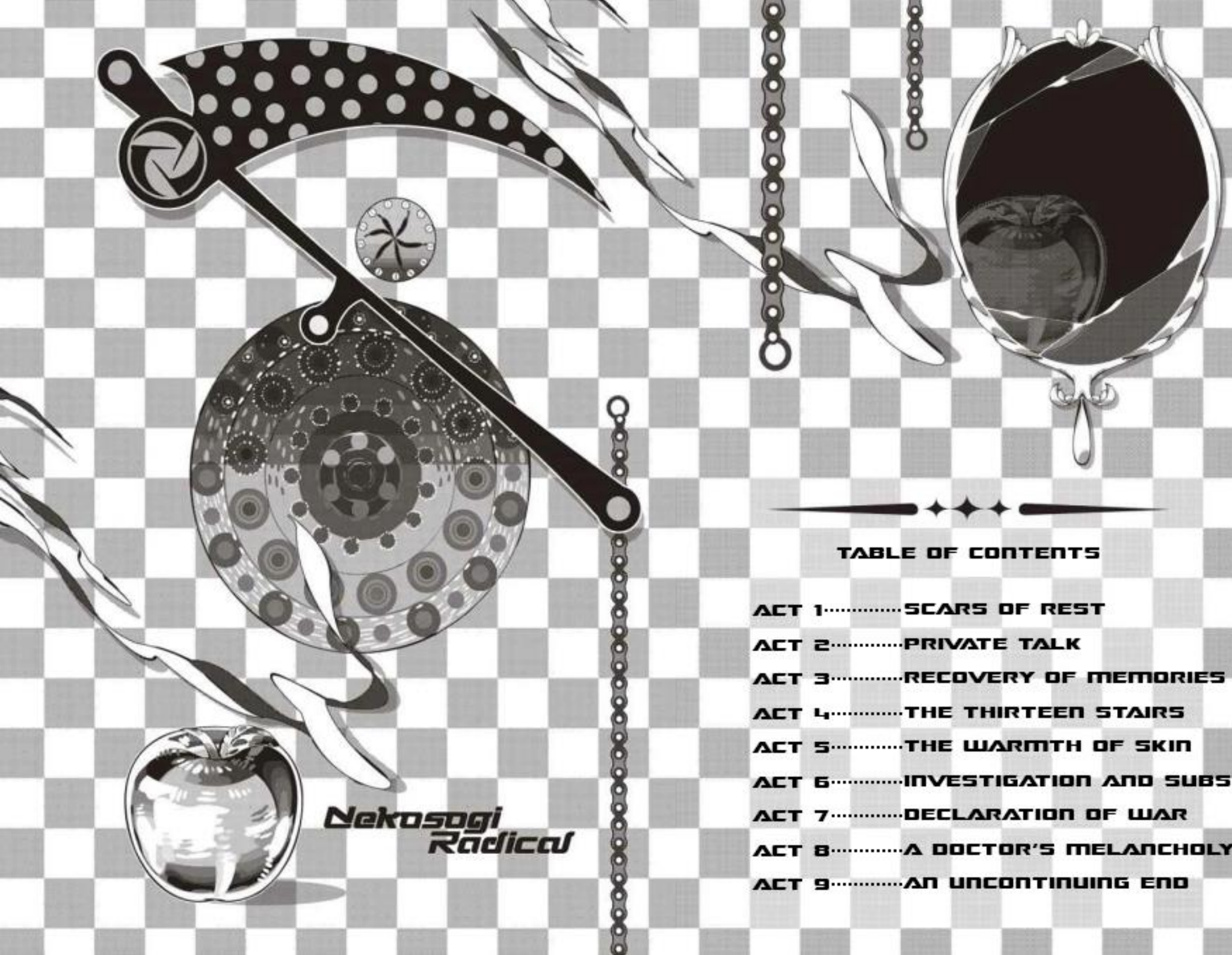


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACT 1……SCARS OF REST
ACT 2……PRIVATE TALK
ACT 3……RECOVERY OF MEMORIES
ACT 4……THE THIRTEEN STAIRS
ACT 5……THE WARMTH OF SKIN
ACT 6……INVESTIGATION AND SUBSTITUTION
ACT 7……DECLARATION OF WAR
ACT 8……A DOCTOR'S MELANCHOLY
ACT 9……AN UNCONTINUING END

TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS -NATSUME SOSEKI

ME (NARRATOR)
PROTAGONIST

Right now, I'm in a graveyard.

A graveyard.
It felt like I had been here for a long time.
And I would probably continue to stay here.
As if I was here before I knew it.
I would probably stay here forever.
I was surrounded by gravestones.
The scenery stole my heart.
Of course, there was no individuality to these gravestones.
They were just arranged side by side in order.
Suddenly, I realized.
That these were the graves of the people I had killed so far.
So far...
The graves of the people who died by my fault.
Dizzily.
My body swayed.
Unstably.
The gravestones surrounding me swayed.
It was the wind's fault.
A strong wind was blowing.
A strong wind.
The wind was blowing for somebody.
The wind was blowing for somebody's sake.
It was a ridiculous delusion.
Wind is wind.
Stone is stone.
Dead people are dead people.
Dead people are, in the end, just dead people.
Just like strangers are, in the end, just strangers.
Thinking that, I walked onward.
I walked down the path.
Surrounded by gravestones on both sides,
I walked slowly along the stone path.
It was like a labyrinth.
It was like an impasse.
The more I walked, the more I got lost.

The more I walked, the more I felt lost.
It was like I was being led somewhere.
The water there is bitter.
The water here is sweet.
That too was a ridiculous delusion.
I repeated myself.
I repeated my ridiculous delusions.
The dead.
The people who died for my sake.
But I'm sure that those men,
and I'm sure that those women,
wouldn't want me to think that their deaths were my fault.
When I realized that,
I felt like the path suddenly opened.
With an exact preciseness, the solution to the labyrinth revealed itself.
With a methodical strictness, the solution to the impasse revealed itself.
Those men.
Those women.
That boy.
That girl.
That person.
That person.
That person and that person and that person and that person.
There's no doubt that they all lived their lives to the fullest.
They didn't half-ass it.
Then.
Then I too.
Should live my life to the fullest.
Those men.
Those women.
That boy.
That girl.
That person.
That person.
That person and that person and that person and that person.
Even if they didn't wish for it.
Even if that wasn't something they wished for.
I should live according to my own will.

Enough already.
Enough acting like a child.
The pouting, the jealousy, and the feeling down.
Let's put an end to my past self.
If I don't do that, I...
I'm sure I could not even continue living.
And then;
I arrived in front of a gravestone.
There was no path anymore.
There was no other path anymore.
This was the end.
The end of the world.
The end of the Story.
The end of the irreplaceable Story.
On that gravestone, there was no inscription.
No letters were engraved.
No words were engraved.
No names were engraved.
This was...
Whose grave was this?
Maybe it belonged to the sacred young savant girl with the blue hair.
Or maybe it belonged to Humanity's Strongest Contractor with the red hair.
Or maybe it belonged to the final existence with the orange hair.
Or maybe...

That was my grave.

And then I woke up.
I was greeted by the morning, as usual.
This was not a graveyard.
And I was not surrounded by gravestones.
I sighed.
I raised my bangs and corrected my breathing.
And, like always,
I longed for someone to be by my side.

Now then.

This is the final story.
This is the end, the last act.
The all-encompassing festival.
From cover to cover,
a radically uprooted story.
Just like always,
even more than like always,
untroubled and casually,
without caring or feeling burdened; let's talk.
Even if there's no longer a world to talk about.
Even then, the story still exists.

ACT 1 - SCARS OF REST

0

I can't like anyone.

1

Saitou Takashi.

Thirty-nine years ago in March, he was born in a hospital in Tokyo to his father, Saitou Kengo, and his mother, Saitou Masami. A baby boy born under two older sisters. His father was a professor of human biology at Takatsu University and a private practitioner. His mother was a musician. His two sisters were twins and they had a gap in age of 10 years to him.

From infancy, Kengo and the staff around him gave him a special education. Thus he spent the majority of his days at Takatsu University. It is said that without ever reading a single academic book, he would assemble theories from scratch in his head, consequently resulting in the media picking up the sensational story of the prodigy. The fact that most of what Kengo had presented to the scientific world, no, that nearly all of it was made possible because of his son's help was later made clear by a whistleblower.

In April, at the age of six, he officially joined the Department of Human Biology at Takatsu University. In July of the same year, he graduated and in September, he advanced to Takatsu University's graduate school, graduating the following March. At the age of seven, he literally passed every program in the various departments at the university's graduate school without any trouble.

At the age of eight, after all this, he joined the laboratory of his father, Kengo. At the time, Kengo was conducting research on the vague and obscure subject of "The Process Towards the End of Collective Life," and unusually, or rather, mysteriously, without any problems to speak of, without any particular incidents, the research proceeded normally.

Normally.

Too normally.

So normally that, thinking back,

it was abnormal, and it stood out.

And then, he turned ten years old.

In July, when he was ten years old, his two elder sisters went missing.

At the time, they were twenty years old and were both students at Takatsu University. They were also involved with their father's research, though not

to the extent of their younger brother. In those days, the Saitou family was reasonably wealthy, thanks in part to the efforts of their son, who was active in many fields. Therefore, the disappearance of the two was hypothesized to be a kidnapping, but with no demands from the supposed culprit, the two sisters' names were simply and concisely added to the list of the many *missing persons* in the country. And just like that, there was only one child left in the Saitou household.

At eleven years old, he was promoted to assistant professor.

At thirteen years old, both parents died.

At almost the same time, he submitted his letter of resignation to Takatsu University.

After that he moved to the United States, where he committed himself to an academic organisation in Texas: The enormous, integrated, and united-ER2 System (now the ER3 System). Of course he did not join as a student of the program, but rather as a researcher. It is said that he worked under Assistant Professor Hewlett, who is said to possess the single greatest mind in the world of academics.

However, for Saitou Takashi, this ER period was a particularly dark era in his career.

Despite the vast global influence of the ER system, it is strangely insular in nature; the results of its research are almost never revealed to the outside. Everything is top secret. Everything is a black box. Of course, for scholars wishing for that kind of environment, for those who loathe the annoying hustle and bustle of the world, it's probably the best place to be. Everyone considered Saitou Takashi's intent to be so, and understood it to be so.

However, that wasn't the case.

In January, at the age of eighteen, he returned to Japan by himself.

In March of his nineteenth year, he returned to the Department of Human Biology at Takatsu University as a professor and also started a private practice. So, on the surface, he was following perfectly in the steps of his father, Kengo.

Only on the surface.

It's presumed that around this time, he started working unofficially on the study of life: The "study of not dying", as it was called. Along with Kigamine Yaku and Madoka Kuchiha, who were both high school students at the time.

Then two years later,

at the age of twenty-one, he moved to the United States again. Rather than returning to ER2, he and his two associates set up their own organization.

The names of those two are still in the records.

One was Kajou Akira.

The other was Aikawa Junya.

However, even though it was an independent organization, five year later it was absorbed into the ER2 system. The name was also changed from the Japanese one, taken from the initials of him and his two associates, to the model number MS-2.

By being incorporated into the ER2 System, his career from then on entered a dark era once again. It's not at all known what rank he held within the ER2 system. It can be said for sure, however, that he was in a different position from when he was a teenager.

At this time, he had already finished learning.

At this time, he had already finished his research.

All he had to do was put it into practice.

All he had to do was experiment.

Eventually, that dark era ended.

Three years later, in the summer of his twenty-ninth year,

he would return to Japan once again.

However, this time he was not alone, but accompanied by his two associates, Kajou Akira and Junya Aikawa, a servant, and... a daughter.

The purpose of his sudden return to Japan remains unknown to this day. Whatever it may have been, it's clear that it was never realised. That is because everyone who came to Japan in the winter of that year died.

Even Kajou Akira.

Even Aikawa Junya.

Even the servant.

Even the daughter.

Even himself.

Because they died.

It was a murder.

Clearly a murder.

In the end, the culprit was never found.

And so, we arrive at the present.

Saitou Takashi. Age of death: 29.

That was something that happened about ten years ago.

“Arriving to say today’s hello and tomorrow’s goodnight, Yamiguchi Houko has finally come for the seventh visit to Nonsense User Onii-chan.”

With that cool greeting, the thirteen year old runaway girl living in the same apartment as me, Yamiguchi Houko-chan, entered my hospital room with a basket of fruit. I had finished today’s rehabilitation, as well as my health checkup, which was basically just being harassed by the nurse in charge, Katanashi Rabumi. This meant I had plenty of free time to think about trivial things and I was currently in the midst of being lost in said thoughts. Houko-chan’s visit was sudden and without any prior notice, but it made me a little happy.

Houko-chan was wearing sandals, a pure white one-piece dress, and a straw hat. When she took off the hat, dark hair in a plain bob cut could be seen. Putting the basket on the cabinet, she pulled out a pipe chair from the side of the locker and sat down beside the bed. This was her seventh visit to this hospital room and, as one would expect, she had become fully

familiarized with it.

“I met Katanashi-san earlier by the reception desk on the first floor. Apparently, you’ll be discharged soon. Congratulations.”

“Yeah... so you encountered Rabumi-san. It must have been difficult.”

Since Rabumi-san was a pretty high tension nurse, and moreover, since Rabumi-san had taken a liking to Houko-chan, it would probably have been troublesome if she was caught in a weird situation. But Houko-chan said, “No, I ran away immediately,” as if it was nothing.

Hmm.....

Well, it’s not like it had been a long while.

However, with girls around this age, their atmosphere can change quickly if you don’t see them for a while.....

Furthermore, she seemed to be getting cuter.

Those doll-like facial features, that white skin, those red lips.

I’m not a young girl lover like Suzunashi-san, but even then, Houko-chan could be said to be an exception.

“Hmm. Well, yes. I’m being discharged on the twentieth. It’s as scheduled. But even so, the injuries healed quite quickly. I was told it would take two months to completely recover, but when I get discharged I’ll apparently already be able to jump and run around again. I can’t do too much strenuous exercise, though.”

“That’s better than nothing.”

“I’ve always healed pretty fast.”

“It seems like it... Your hair too, even though it was cut recently, it’s already nearly returned to how it was before.”

“Though it’s not like this haircut is the default....” I answered while playing with my bangs, which had certainly grown a lot. “Didn’t I say it before? It used to be a lot longer. When I was about Houko-chan’s age, I had my hair in a braid.”

“That’s beyond my imagination.”

Houko-chan shrugged.

“The next time you want to get a haircut, please contact me.”

“Yeah.”

“Since Hime-nee-sama is... no longer here.”

“....Yeah.”

It had been a month since Hime-chan died.

A month had passed since she was killed.

Regardless of whether a person dies or not, time just passes like it always does, automatically and autonomously. Of course, this month would be no different from the one before it, and while I know that time won’t be extended or shortened by my personal feelings, a month has still come and gone.

I was still in a hospital in Kyoto for the treatment of my wounds. That is, the wounds that I sustained last month when I got involved in that abominable incident related to Assistant Professor Kigamine’s “Research on Immortality”, where Hime-chan was killed.

However, I’d been used to getting injured for a long time (that’s why my wounds healed so quickly), and so inevitably I’d been used to getting hospitalized since I was a child. To put it in other words: hospitalization was boring. Since this was a private room, the only people I could talk to were the visitors who came to visit from time to time, or Rabumi-san who would come here to escape work from time to time, so it was boring.

To escape from that boredom, I decided to do some research.

On the man I met last month.

“.....”

His name was Saitou Takashi.

No, he didn’t call himself that.

From start to finish, he didn’t call himself by his own name.

It was not yet the time to name himself, or so he had said.

However, even so, I knew that Assistant Professor Kigamine had been his student, so using that fact as a starting point, I personally investigated him.

According to what I could find within the limitations of my skills; he was no longer alive.

Or rather, he was dead.

I was quite disappointed to see that he was not in fact dead.

If I made a request to Kunagisa or her friend *Chiikun*, Ayanami Hyou, I could get more details, but... things being as they were, I ended up feeling like I didn't want to get too involved in the situation.

In the first place, it was not an action with much meaning.

In the end, it was to escape boredom.

It was just to kill time.

He....

That fox-masked man did promise to see me again, but if another meeting was possible there'd be no hardship. Both of us didn't know the other's contact info or anything, did we?

No matter how much you wish to meet again....

If there's no connection, then that's it.

"By the way, Onii-chan. Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

"Things I want you to do?"

"Since it's one of my rare visits to Onii-chan, I'd like to do something useful for you."

"Mmm, yeah... that's an admirable attitude. Then why don't you just wipe me down like you did last time? To be honest, I sweated a lot while I was asleep earlier."

"Understood. Is the towel in the cabinet as usual?"

"Yeah. Please. Just the upper body is fine."

I opened my hospital gown and took off my shirt. Houko-chan took a towel from the cabinet, drew water from the faucet of this private room, crawled on top of the bed, and went around to my back.

"....But you know."

Houko-chan muttered while wiping my back with the damp towel. I didn't know if it was because she was a kid, or if it was something unique to her, but it was hard to read the emotions in her voice, so I didn't know what she was going to say while I waited for her next words.

"Onii-chan's body... when I look carefully at it, it's full of scars. A mix of new ones and old ones here and there."

"Oh... well. Is that too much for a girl?"

"In my case, not so much."

“It’s a relief that the scars on my cheek have disappeared relatively cleanly, though. It would’ve been a problem if they stood out. I don’t know what people walking around with tattoos on their face feel like.”

“I don’t think anyone knows that.”

Houko-chan held her words a bit there.

“Moeta’s body is similar, but not to this point.”

Moeta was the name of Houko-chan’s older brother, who was two years older than her. His last name was different, though. He was named Ishinagi Moeta.

“It’s probably because I’m weak, so I get hurt easily. At least, in my case.”

“That may be it.”

Houko-chan had no mercy.

“Even so, Onii-chan.”

“What?”

“Onii-chan’s body is something irreplaceable, so please take better care of yourself.”

“.....”

Something irreplaceable, huh.

With those words, I was reminded.

Jail Alternative.

The concept that there is a substitute for everything, that even if someone doesn’t do something, someone else will do it. That in this world there’s nothing irreplaceable.

And, in addition to that, Back Nozzle.

The concept that if something must happen, even if there was no sign of it until now, even if it was something that wasn’t even born yet, if it must happen at all, then there’s no way to avoid it. That sometime, somewhere, it will happen, and if it didn’t happen, then it was something that already happened a long time ago. That there is nothing in this world that can be avoided.

Jail Alternative and Back Nozzle.

Two concepts that colored last month’s case.

Both were affirmations of destiny; affirmations of the Story.

And,

denial of the individual.

Denial of a world of individuals.

“If you don’t mind me trying to sound a bit cool... if I didn’t get hurt, then someone else would’ve been hurt instead. In that case, Houko-chan, isn’t it better that I was the one to get hurt?”

“That cruel way of thinking is no good.” Houko-chan said. “Onii-chan, you’re a bit of a coward.”

“Coward?”

“Underhanded.”

“Underhanded.....”

“Or should I say cunning?

“.....Cunning.....”

Why does she have to say it that way?

“Come to think of it, Onii-chan is always like that, isn’t he? It may be uncalled for advice, but I think you should be more attentive to the ones around you.”

“Even so, I’m pretty sure I’m a very thoughtful person.”

“If it’s your own pain, you can tolerate it. But you can’t feel other people’s pain. You can’t tolerate it. That’s what I’m talking about, Nonsense User Onii-chan. Do you understand?” Houko-chan said. “In other words, try to put yourself in the shoes of the people worried about you.”

“.....So you’re worried about me, Houko-chan.”

“Yes, I’m worried”

Houko-chan sighed as if she was fed up.

That action was not very fitting for a young girl.

Even more so for a pretty girl.

“I can’t stand to watch it. It’s like looking up from below at someone walking a tightrope with no pole and no safety net. It may be Onii-chan who falls off the rope, but it’s actually me who’s going to see the crushed corpse.”

“That’s a really unpleasant metaphor....”

“By the way, Nonsense User Onii-chan.”

“What is it?”

“Onii-chan, I heard you confessed to Mii-nee-san.”

“.....”

Oops.

How did she find out?

“Hmm... it wasn’t something as concrete as a confession. It’s just that I’m indebted to Miiko-san, and last month... she said some rough things, you know.”

Miiko-san. Asano Miiko-san.

She was a twenty-two year-old freeter who, like Houko-chan, lived in the same apartment as me. She had a samurai-like ponytail and a dignified atmosphere. She was a swordswoman who spent her days dressed in a jinbei. She was the oldest resident at the apartment and was loved by almost everyone. The one exception was Koutoumaru-san, but even then, they would fight everyday like they were having fun.

Miiko-san……

Miiko-san, huh.

I haven't seen her in a while.

In the end, she didn't come to visit me even once, so I haven't seen her for about a month.

……

That wasn't really a confession.

However, it was something close to that.

And the fact that she didn't come visit me at the hospital….

It was somewhat hopeless.

Depressing.

Certainly, I won't deny that I was somewhat relieved, but it was still quite disappointing to get no response.

"From the looks of it, it seems like you still haven't received an answer, Nonsense User Onii-chan."

"Well……"

"I never thought that Onii-chan would have the nerve to fall for someone."

"Is that so? It's pretty easy for me to fall in love, you know."

"That's not something to be proud of."

"…….No mercy."

"But if you can fall in love with someone, then it's something you can understand, right?"

"Something I can understand? What's that?"

"Please do a banzai pose."

"Yes, yes."

As commanded, I lifted up my arms. After washing the towel in the basin, Houko-chan began to wipe my armpits. Because of Houko-chan's small hands, it tickled a bit.

"When Hime-nee-sama died."

"Hmm?"

"Onii-chan, you were sad, right?"

“.....That’s, well, somewhat...”

Yukariki Ichihime. Hime-chan.

Even though I had only known her for about two months.

The void created by her absence....

It didn’t look like it’d be filled.

Not that I had any intention of filling it.

“Then I think that what Onii-chan should do from now on is not atonement, regret, or self-sacrifice, but to not make the ones around you sad.”

“.....”

“That is, if you’ll let me express my personal feelings... I don’t want to grieve for the people I love. I don’t want to worry about the people I love.”

Houko-chan declared with a strong, determined voice that was unusual for the girl.

“If there are people who will be sad if I get hurt, then, with an iron will, I will refuse to get hurt. I will never get hurt so that the people I love don’t get sad.”

“.....”

“I wish for Onii-chan to be like that too.”

While she was wiping the other side of my body, I put down my arms. I took a breath and thought over the meaning of what Houko-chan said.

Well, she was right.

It was somewhat painful to just be told off, though.

But this girl really had no mercy.

“.....Thank you. I’ll wipe the front myself.”

“That’s normal. Were you really thinking of making me do that?”

“Give me the towel.”

“Okay.”

Though, having said that, Houko-chan didn’t give me the towel. I found it odd, so I tried to turn back, but because of the heavy load that clung to my back, this action was interrupted.

“.....Houko-chan?”

“A little.”

With her lightly clinging to my back, with her soft arms around my neck, Houko-chan said with a small, vanishing voice.

“Let me stay like this for a little.”

“.....Houko-chan?”

“Just five more seconds in this pose.”

“……”
I heard the sound of heartbeats.
The sound of my heartbeat and the sound of Houko-chan’s heartbeat.
Both of them were beating quickly, like a bell.
I couldn’t say anything.
My mouth wouldn’t open.
I couldn’t turn back.
And so, while remaining still like that, time passed.
One second.
Two seconds.
Three seconds.
Four seconds.
Then five seconds…

“……Am I interrupting?”

The door of the hospital room opened and Miiko-san entered.
The sound of my heartbeat stopped.
No, if it stopped I’d die.
I thought I was dead.
“……”
Explanation of the situation.
Private room.
On the bed.
A half naked nineteen year old.
A thirteen year old (pretty girl) clinging onto his back.
Their two bodies in contact.
Miiko-san’s cold gaze.
……
There was no need for words between us.
We were able to communicate even without such a thing.
“……Well then.”
Houko-chan untied the arms around my neck, got off the bed, and put on her sandals.
“Nonsense User Onii-chan. Sorry, even though I just arrived, I must go to the library. So Miiko-san, please take your time.”
“……Yeah.”
“……”

I directed a gaze asking for help towards Houko-chan, who had passed by Miiko-san's side and was about to walk out of the hospital room, but all she did was point her fingers at her cheeks and made a cute pose that didn't fit her cool appearance at all.

"Nonsense User Onii-chan."

Houko-chan then said.

"Even I can get jealous."

"....."

"Then, I wish you good health, friendship, and reunions."

With those parting words, she closed the door.

Only two people were left in the hospital room.

Me and Miiko-san.

I hadn't seen her in a month.

Cold air drifted into the hospital room.

As if feeling that cold air, Miiko-san stared at the fruit basket on top of the cabinet.

She seemed somewhat sleepy. But in her case, that was the norm. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, she had a simple inexpressiveness. In that aspect, she was similar to Houko-chan.

In the meantime, I put my shirt back on and closed the front of my hospital gown.

"Inoji."

".....Yes."

"A thirteen year old is bad, don't you think?"

"No... that's not it....." in response to that critical tone, I denied with all my being. "That's... she was washing my sweat and..."

"Hmm. It's fine. It doesn't matter to me at all."

"....."

She was angry.

Miiko-san was a straightforward person, but this kind of anger was rare.

It was hard to deal with.

"Umm... did you come here with Houko-chan?"

"Yeah. Only, I was caught by a strange nurse at the reception desk. Houko managed to escape, but as for me..."

It was no good, Miiko-san said.

I see....

Houko-chan said "I was", now that I thought about it.

So, as I thought, Houko-chan... It was a premeditated crime. I wondered if this was yet another one of Nanananami's plans... No, it wasn't venomous enough for it to have been one of that witch's schemes. That means it was Houko-chan's own decision.

Jealousy, she said.

Jealousy, huh.....

Envy, jealousy.

Well, Miiko-san was a very popular person at the apartment. Houko-chan was very fond of Miiko-san, so it wouldn't be surprising if my pseudo-confession was seen by her as an attempt at getting ahead.

"Inoji is popular."

"....."

"It looked like the nurse from earlier was very fond of you. And that blue haired girl has this recharging thing... and people from the apartment come to your room all the time."

"....."

The unpleasant attack began.

I had no other choice but to resign myself and receive it.

"And your part time job is tutoring middle school girls."

"I was already fired from that....."

If you're hospitalized for a month, it's natural.

Well, since Hime-chan died, most of her school fees were returned to my bank account, so my livelihood returned to normal.

"And you often go hang out with that weird red haired woman."

Miiko-san's attack still continued. She had yet to realize that Houko-chan's earlier actions were not aimed towards me, but towards Miiko-san herself. It seemed like an easy thing to realize, but Miiko-san was quite thickheaded. Despite showing an unusually sharp intuition when it came to others, when it came to herself, she was slow to the point that it became hard to understand how she could be so dense.

"And it seems you make regular contact with that female detective. And last month you lived with a nympho, and that nympho picked up a girl."

"Nympho...."

Was it Kasugai-san?

I don't know about that, she.....

"And... and....."

"No, no more..."

"And also, you confessed to me."

“.....”

“On top of that, you didn’t come back at all.”

I looked at Miiko-san’s face.

I saw... nothing out of the ordinary.

It was the usual blank expression.

“.....As you can see, I’m currently hospitalized.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll be discharged in about four days, though.”

“Yeah, I heard earlier.” Miiko-san nodded. “I’m glad it wasn’t anything serious.”

“It was a close call, though.....”

Truly... It seemed like it was truly a close call.

I had walked the line between life and death.

Not metaphorically.

Literally.

That’s how much...

Last month’s case was abnormal, I guess.

“But Miiko-san, my consciousness came back a while ago, so... couldn’t you have come to visit me? I was lonely.”

“That’s my bad.” Miiko-san bowed her head in an unexpectedly honest manner. “It’s just that, not to say the same thing as Hou, but... I had some hesitation as well.”

“Hesitation?”

“About how to answer you.”

“.....”

Confession... huh.

Like I said to Houko-chan: even I don’t know whether that was a confession or not. Or if that was just me obscuring things with nonsense and expressing ideas vaguely to escape from reality as always. I truly don’t know.

In that situation.

At that place.

At that time.

What did I say?

What was the meaning of the words I spoke?

In the first place, the situation was unique.

So, once I returned to my everyday life.

As expected, I began to feel self-conscious.

In that sense, it might very well be escapism.

Being afraid of the answer.
Being afraid of the result.
Staying still forever.
Not changing, like always.
Before Hime-chan died....
The seemingly unchanging me.
"Please, think about your response."
That's certainly what I said.
What was I thinking exactly?
Didn't I want to not get hurt?
With this many wounds already covering my body.
With this many wounds already covering my soul.
With a heart full of scars.
That was, truly, nonsense.
If I were to get hurt....
Would there be any people who'd be sad?
"You know, Inoji. I...."
Miiko-san said.
"I'm pretty much no good as a person."
"....What?" In response to those uncharacteristic words from Miiko-san, I tilted my head. "What's that? What does that mean?"
"My only talent is swinging my sword."
"Those words... I've already heard them before."
"I'm no good. Especially when it comes to love affairs."
"....."
"I'm quite thickheaded."
"I understand that, but...."
"Well... it's not something to hide, so I'll just say it." Miiko-san continued with practically no expression. "Up until now, I've gone out with four people."
"Yeah."
I had already predicted that.
Well, she was three years older than me.
So I was already prepared for that.
"Amongst them, three were women."
.....Unexpected.
Umm.....
".....And the last one, was he a man?"

“Rather, the first one,” Miiko-san said. “It was when I was in middle school, so I’d say it was a boy, rather than a man.”

“.....”

So she even counted up to middle school.....

She was so serious.

“You see, that boy was bullied.”

“.....”

“After that, there was one more during middle school. Then there were two during high school. All of them were women, and all of them were bullied.”

“.....”

“I liked people who were bullied. No, that’s not it... weak people, I think I probably liked weak people.”

“That’s an unpleasant analysis.....”

“No, this isn’t something you should joke about, it’s serious,” Miiko-san said. “Essentially, I was someone who liked helping people... that’s what I think. Saying that ‘not paying any mind to righteousness is bravery’ sounds great on paper, but it wasn’t something that beautiful.”

“Yeah.....”

“It went too far, and I ended up dropping out of high school... did I already tell you about that?”

“Yeah... though not in such detail. In other words... um, you protected those kids who got bullied? Regardless of whichever one it was.”

“Whichever one, or rather, both.”

“Both?”

“I was a two-timer.”

“.....”

No good.

No good, no good.

This person... when it came to love, was truly no good.

Or maybe, rather, someone who was romantically tone-deaf....

“It would’ve been fine if that was all.”

“No, it already wasn’t fine.”

“Those four didn’t really grow as people by going out with me. They ended up even weaker.”

“I see.”

“They ended up even weaker.”

“Enough to say it twice.....”

.....Well, if you spoil someone getting bullied, that's generally what happens. It's a shame, but that's reality. I was somewhat like that myself, so it was an easy story to understand.

Myself?

I see.....

I see. It was a story about me. It was both Miiko-san's story and my story at the same time.

"In other words, I...." Miiko-san faced me. "I'm a specialist at making broken people even worse."

"That's a bad talent."

"Therefore, I hesitate."

"....."

"You, if you were to go out with me, would you be fine?"

"Be fine....."

"Do you think you'd be fine?"

It was a direct question.

Miiko-san looked into my eyes.

I regretted the fact that Houko-chan had gone home. This tense atmosphere that was exploding like a spark between Miiko-san and myself made me feel that the one just before wasn't so bad.

".....Miiko-san."

"I know my own weakness. It's something Suzunashi-san has often told me... Yeah, I am probably too soft. I poke my nose in other people's business. Even though they could recover by themselves, I extend my hands towards them."

"....."

"I can't watch over them. That's my weakness."

"But Miiko-san–"

"That's why I'm very careful about keeping my distance from other people," Miiko-san said, ignoring my interjection while forcefully tying her words together. "Maintaining a distance... and measuring the space in-between."

Miiko-san's sense of distance was pleasant.

Without useless meddling.

Without holding useless concerns.

But not without any meddling.

But not without holding any concern.

That was probably the main reason why Miiko-san was so well-liked in that apartment full of weirdos. It was like staying by her side was always natural, or rather, she wasn't annoying, she possessed unique spacing.

To put it simply:

Miiko-san was a pleasant person.

"But... if we were to go out, that distance would probably be lost. I'd lose control."

"....."

"I'd surely spoil you to death. I would completely take over all the work that you should be doing. Honestly, you would probably be the type that stimulates that part in me."

"So I'm a kid being bullied?"

"Yes."

She nodded at me.

But still, Miiko-san said.

"It seems you've been working hard."

"....."

"Regardless of whether it's conscious or not." Miiko-san crossed her arms. She seemed to be choosing her words. In the first place, she wasn't someone who spoke a lot. Though, if I had to say, she was more of a poor talker than a quiet person. "Well, you almost gave up last month... but even then, you were doing your best."

"Even if you say I did my best, I'm still in this miserable state. It's not exactly like what Houko-chan said the other day, but recently it feels like the hospital is my home."

".....I don't want to bother you."

Without addressing my joke, Miiko-san went quiet.

Her words didn't continue.

It seemed to be the end.

I don't want to bother you... With that, it was finished.

I racked my brain.

"Umm... in other words..."

"Yes?"

"So what's the conclusion?"

"Yes."

Miiko-san nodded,

and only said the conclusion.

"You and I can't go out together."

“……”
Uwaah.
I was flatly rejected.
From the front,
without the possibility of evasion,
fairly and unapologetically,
I was rejected.
The shock of it made me feel a little dizzy.
……What was it, last month’s behavior……..
“I hesitated, but I think that we shouldn’t go out together.”
“We can’t……”
“We would ruin each other.”
Even before having gone out together, that reason……
It was too much.
“I don’t want to become ruined. And also, I don’t want to ruin you. Then it’s doubly ruined.”
“……..”
“I’m too overprotective. I’d probably forgive you for everything. I don’t think that’s a good thing. Well, when she was clinging to your back earlier, it was probably a joke, but unless it’s someone strict like Hou, unless it’s a human who possesses no mercy, they probably **could not let you live**. I’m no good. I can’t be with you.”
“I am…”
A little surprised.
At me trying to persist.
At me being bad at giving up.
I was rejected, and instead of feeling sad or hurt or disappointed, I still hadn’t given up and was trying to cling on. So I was a little surprised.
At that point, I finally realised it.
Ah, that’s it.
I truly liked Miiko-san.
I wanted to be by her side.
No matter how much pain would accompany it.
“I want to go out with you, Miiko-san. So then, why not?”
“……..You and I, I think we have good compatibility.”
“That’s……”
That’s… a bad habit.
Something that fuels hope.

That's no comfort to me.

"**Between you who wants to be liked by someone… and me who wants to like someone**, certainly, the compatibility is good. However, if only the compatibility is good, then it's not enough. We could make it work as friends, but beyond that, it seems like the balance…"

"The balance?"

"No… like I thought, it's the distance, I guess. We wouldn't be able to keep a comfortable distance. It would become something really sticky. We would probably flirt all day. I could see it."

"……"

I couldn't see such a thing, though.

But… would it become like that?

Going out with someone, would it be like that?

I…..

It's not like I wished for something like that.

Just with Miiko-san.

"That may bring happiness… but I hate sticky human relationships. Because of past experiences."

"That's…."

That's the same for me.

However, with Miiko-san, it wasn't like that.

No…Was I wrong?

No, no, it wasn't like that.

That's right, I understood it well.

Wanting to like someone.

Wanting to be liked by someone.

Those words… that expression, it was true.

It was correct.

Even though Houko-chan had said it, in reality it was not that. It was not that I was a human who couldn't like anyone… I couldn't be liked by anyone, that's the kind of human I was.

I couldn't get people to like me.

It's the inverse.

It's upside down.

The opposite of love, the opposite of affection. They're words that are used often. The opposite of love is hatred and the opposite of affection is disgust. That shouldn't be wrong.

I just wanted to be liked by someone, and if I just chose Miiko-san to be that someone... **If I wanted to be liked by Miiko-san, if I wished for that, then that'd mean**....

"Then... Miiko-san."

"Yes?"

"If I...."

If I wasn't the person that I am now.

If I was firm, if I had my feet on the ground.

If I became like that.

If I changed like that.

At that time, would you—

Suddenly, the door opened.

I thought Houko-chan had come back.

The timing was just too good to be true.

Houko-chan must have been listening on the other side of the door, that's what I thought.

However, I was wrong.

I was completely wrong.

I put my guard up at once.

The one standing there... was an unknown man.

A man I'd never seen before.

"It's my cool entrance scene... so open up your ears for my next line...."

The man pointed at me and Miiko-san.

His right hand at Miiko-san.

His left hand at me.

"My name is Kino Raichi, Twelfth Step of the *Thirteen Stairs*. As casually as possible, please call me Kinoracchi."

Behind the man....

The door slowly closed.

As if he was enclosing us within.

Without thinking, I swallowed.

Thirteen Stairs.

That was the starting signal.

2

Thirteen Stairs.

Those words, other than the simple meaning of thirteen stairs, held a special meaning for me and for a small number of other people.

For example, last month.

The reason why I was still in this hospital, even now, was because of that *pair* who were both members of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

People called them the Niounomiya siblings of massacre magic.

The horror of it penetrated deep into my body.

However, that's not **the reason**.

That's not why the words *Thirteen Stairs* made me feel a certain kind of shiver. It wasn't the usual; it had a more direct meaning.

It was because those *Thirteen Stairs* were, to put it plainly, a unit under the direct control of that fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi, the one who swore to meet me again.

Literally his *Stairs*.

For one of those *Stairs* to be in this hospital, at the coordinates where the Nonsense User resided, that fact alone.

It meant that the time had finally come.

That what should happen was finally happening.

That shiver assaulted me.

Finally, finally, it began. Was that what it meant?

Last month's continuation... No.

The end of everything.

"Kino... Raichi."

He was a man with a toned body. He might have worked out, but rather than having muscles, he was simply toned. I couldn't see it otherwise. In addition to his thin clothes, it seemed like he had a slim figure if looked at from afar. However, he didn't seem unreliable.

Long black hair and an Alice band.

Since his eyes were hidden by flashy sunglasses resembling those of bicycle racers, it was hard to read his expression, but his mouth was loose and warped. He wore loose-fitting knee-length pants with a bicycle chain as a

belt. On both feet, he wore getas that felt far too unnatural on the hospital's linoleum floor.

"Umm...."

Kino Raichi—Kino-san looked at me and Miiko-san in turn.

"As for myself, I have heard a lot about you from Mr. Fox, so meeting you face to face feels like **I finally met you**, but... for you, that shouldn't be the case. This meeting should be quite sudden. Even then, you haven't changed your expression at all, you haven't moved your shoulders one bit, that's pretty impressive, huh?"

"....."

What Kino-san said wasn't accurate.

I'd been thinking about this encounter for a long time. From the moment I woke up from my coma in the hospital last month, this meeting had been on my mind.

That's why I wasn't especially surprised.

If I had a question it would have been why the fox-masked man didn't come to this hospital on his own, instead sending a subordinate, a Thirteen Stairs or whatever. That was about it.

So... in other words, it still wasn't *the time*, was that it? It wasn't yet the time for him **to identify himself** to me, was that what it meant?

Then this man, Kino Raichi.

Why had he come here?

Depending on the situation, it could be bad.

Above all else, the worst thing was Miiko-san's presence here.

Miiko-san was a complete outsider, a respectable person. She was a resident of what Kunagisa would call the surface world, the normal world. There was no way that I'd involve her. Let alone with *Thirteen Stairs*, Miiko-san probably didn't even know the name Saitou Takashi.

No matter what, I couldn't get her involved.

I needed to let her escape somehow.

But that's not as easy as it sounded in my head, was it....?

Thirteen Stairs.

The twelfth step, he said.

When I heard it last month, I'm sure he said that half of them weren't even present yet... then this might mean that for the fox-masked man, *the situation was ready*.

The twelfth, huh.....

I couldn't imagine him being on the level of Izumu-kun... I couldn't see Izumu-kun and Kino-san possessing abilities of the same level.

I mean, Izumu-kun–Izumu the *Man Eater*.

He was even a match for that Aikawa Jun....

'Why did he come here'. That's what you're thinking, right? *Ii-chan*." Kino-san leaned his back against the door and, without coming closer to me, continued his story. "But well, be at ease for now. It's not something that important. It's just a visit, an errand from Mr. Fox."

An errand.....

Kino-san grinned and then laughed.

"I see... so you're Mr. Fox's *enemy.*"

"....."

"For the last week or so, I was really excited to see the face of the man that Mr. Fox chose to be his enemy. But I'm surprised. As one would expect of that guy, his way of choosing enemies is different."

Saying that, Kino-san took his glasses off.

Then he glared at me with his eyes.

"To think that *Ii-chan* was a woman."

"....."

"....."

I glanced at Miiko-san.

Miiko-san glanced at me.

.....Huh?

What's that?

Was there a misunderstanding?

Even though my hair had grown, it wasn't like it had grown that much compared to how it was before, and since the lines of my body were visible in this hospital gown, it wasn't **that kind** of misunderstanding.

However, then that meant.

"For being a woman, you have a fearless look. Even in my world, there's not that many who have eyes as resolved as those. You have good eyes, *Ii-chan*"

"....."

"Compared to those, that kid besides you has really poor eyes. It looks like he got frightened by my appearance and could cry at any moment. Don't worry, I won't bully you. I don't know who you are and I don't want to, the one I came to see is just that *Ii-chan* next to you."

"....."

“.....”

Crap.....

Another idiot.

This guy... what did he hear from the fox-masked man?

No matter how you look at it, I’m the one hospitalized, right?

I’m the one lying on the bed, right?

Miiko-san is sitting on a chair, right?

How exactly do you come to that misunderstanding.....

.....

Ah.

I see, so he chose by appearance.

“Mm?”

However, it seemed he noticed that something was off, so he wasn’t that much of an idiot. Kino-san gave Miiko-san and me a questioning look.

“What? You haven’t said anything in a while, but... you, maybe you’re not *Ii-chan*?”

“No.”

The one who answered was Miiko-san.

“I’m definitely *Ii-chan*.”

“.....Miiko-san!?”

“Miiko becomes Mii-chan. When you repeat it in your head, the first sound disappears, and that becomes Ii-chan.”

Miiko-san said so,

and got up from the chair without any sound.

“You just be silent and watch, Suzuki Tarou-kun.”

“.....”

Again an obvious fake name.....

Rather, Miiko-san, what--

“And? Umm... Kino... what does this guy, Kino, want with this *Ii-chan*? It’s not like it’s just a visit, right? Guys who say they *don’t have any special business*, generally, are the ones with extremely troublesome business.”

“Hmm... that impudent attitude. It seems you’re really *Ii-chan*.”

“That’s right. I am impudent.”

Miiko-san puffed out her chest and put on airs.

.....Do I really have that kind of image?

But this was bad.

The situation I had feared came to pass so easily.

Considering Miiko-san's personality, I knew that she'd try to protect me first, but even then, I didn't expect the other party to make the arrangements. If this was the enemy's scheme, then it was something reminiscent of the great strategist, Shiogi-chan, but it didn't seem Kino-san had that much intellect, so it could only be bad luck.

Luck... no, destiny?

There was no avoiding it, was that it?

But Miiko-san was bad.

Letting her get involved was bad.

Should I call for help.....

I immediately thought of the nurse call button behind me, but the *Thirteen Stairs* and the fox-masked man behind it were too dangerous to call for help here.

"Hehehe... But even so, that's quite a foolish question, *Ii-chan*. What business, you say? Even if it comes down to my life, it's not something I can say out loud, since I'm what you could call a pro player." Kino-san said, adding, Oops, you're an amateur. "Setting aside my business, *Ii-chan*. What I'm about to do, isn't it obvious? If you're a woman, then why don't you guess? We're a man and a woman facing each other, you know?"

"....."

Kino-san put his sunglasses back on.

Then suddenly, he raised his voice.

"**There's nothing they'd do besides killing each other!**"

"Killing each other, I see."

Thud.

A sound just like that was generated.

In the next moment, Miiko-san was in front of Kino-san.

From the side of the bed to the front of the door.

She slid her feet in a way that it seemed like she teleported.

"Oh... uh, oh?"

Flustered, Kino-san tried to step back, but since his back was still on the door, his movements were sealed. There was a wall to his left so, essentially, Kino-san had been immediately cornered by Miiko-san.

"Y, You–"

"Surprisingly, you can't do anything at this distance."

The distance between Kino-san and Miiko-san was already only a few centimeters. Certainly, at this distance they were too close to each other for

him to take any action. Even if he wanted to create some distance, he was blocked by the wall and the door.

"Guh... wh- what? That weird movement–"

"It's not weird. It's just normal footwork in kendo."

Saying that, Miiko-san stepped backwards and, without leaving her opponent time to breathe,

She swung her right arm.

Click-clack.

This time, it was a light but flashy sound.

In her right hand was a shiny black expandable baton. It was the one that Miiko-san carried around with her on a daily basis and said that it was for self-defense. Earlier, when Kino-san was rambling on about something, she casually took it out from her person.

What a person.

In this situation, she was already prepared.

"You should take off your sunglasses and your Alice band, just in case."

Miiko-san said, and then took a stance.

The jodan-no-kamae.

"A head-on blow might leave you blind."

"I heard that you had no connection to combat, but...." Kino-san distanced himself from the wall and the door and, as if searching for an opportunity, faced Miiko-san. "Kendo, you said? Hmm, kendo, huh...."

"....."

I was completely left behind.

It seemed I couldn't participate.

That's right....

Miiko-san was pretty strong.

At the very least, to the extent that I was not worthy of being her opponent.

Pretty strong... and, on top of that,

quite quick to lose her temper.

Hot blooded.

Even though it'd been a while since she'd turned twenty, her simple, unassuming demeanor made it hard to believe that she had such a rough temperament at heart. From the fact that when Suzunashi-san, *that* Suzunashi-san who was also called Violence Neon, formed a duo with Miiko-san she always played the role of the pacifier, you can imagine the level of Miiko-san's brutality.

At the word "kendo," Kino-san stopped his frivolous talk, as if he was now cautious.

He probably sensed it... I think.

Kendo.

It was a far too common word, one that you'd hear on a daily basis. At middle schools and high schools, it was a *sport* you could learn, so it seemed like it was overlooked.....

Kendo was distinctly different from other common martial arts.

After that incident in July, I'd tagged along with Miiko-san for her early morning training, and I was able to get a feel for it. Miiko-san taught kendo to the kids in the neighborhood from time to time, so that's why I asked her, but the answer I got from Miiko-san was "If you want to do it for your health like the kids that's one thing, but.... if you want self-defense, then don't do kendo."

Right.

Kendo wasn't for self-defense.

Furthermore, it wasn't even for combat.

It was a means to kill.

With a sharp sword, cut your opponent's wrists, throat, body, and forehead.

Of course, there's also the goal of maintaining a dignified spirit.

But no matter what you say, that's the basis of it.

Cut.

Cut.

Cut... a human.

Cut a life.

Miiko-san said that for someone following the path of the sword, they must at the very least have that degree of resolve.

That degree of resolve.

The resolve to kill someone.

That's right.

The art of kendo could kill someone.

Even if the tool wasn't a blade but a baton, it was the same thing....

"....."

However, this was no joke.

No matter how strong Miiko-san was, even if her skill was on par with Japan's top class, even if kendo was a means to kill....

Thirteen Stairs.

Even if not to the extent of Izumu-kun, there was no doubt Kino-san was an inhuman existence.....

".....Hehehe."

Kino-san grabbed his half pants, removed the chain he used as a belt, and coiled it around his arm. It seemed that just like the delinquent students of the past, he intended to use that chain as a weapon. I wonder if upon seeing that Miiko-san's weapon was a baton, he chose the best suited weapon.

Anyway, this was bad.

The way the situation was going was bad.

Since it's come to this, it can't be helped. If I gave my name, then at least for now, Kino-san's interest would be diverted from Miiko-san. That was the only solution in this case. If I was alone, I would choose to escape, but in this case, I couldn't really say that. If Kino-san really was a subordinate of that fox-masked man, then at the very least, since we hadn't yet met again at this point, I probably wouldn't get killed.

Because... this situation.

Compared to last month, it couldn't be said to be the worst....

"Don't say anything unnecessary, Suzuki Tarou-kun."

Just when I was about to call Kino-san's name, Miiko-san, without diverting her gaze from Kino-san, said with a voice so strong it could kill.

"I'm not a fool... I can tell by his presence that he's not someone normal. But if I had to say, that's the no-good part of me talking."

"Miiko-san–"

"Subconsciously, I want to protect you."

She advanced towards Kino-san by one step.

"Even though my only talent is swinging my sword, I meddle. I can't stand to just look. I can't restrain myself when someone gets hurt in front of me."

I can't watch people get hurt.

My body.

My spirit.

They have too many scars to count.

"That's why... I can't be with you," Miiko-san said. "When I look at you, I'm reminded of my own faults... because you and I, in some respects, are extremely similar."

Similar... to me.

I am similar to everyone.

Without individuality,

and,

possessing various defects.

Possessing every defect of other people.

In this case.

Asano Miiko's defect....

"**I'd rather get hurt and die first than see someone else get hurt in front of me**." Miiko-san took one step further. "I simply want to like people."

"....."

"Then let's get this started.....!"

Miiko-san suddenly stepped in.

With the earlier "normal kendo footwork."

This time with a yell, she raised her baton.

Swiftly, like slicing through the air.

But with a surprisingly flexible form.

She raised her baton.

And swung down.

"Uuoooooooooh!"

And Kino-san's reaction to that was....

Something truly lame.

Flinging away his chain, he jumped to the side and dodged Miiko-san's attack. No, it wasn't something tight enough to call it "dodging" from an observer's perspective. It was no different than just falling down. On top of that, there was a locker in the direction of where he jumped to, and he hit his head hard against it.

"Wha... hey, hey seriously?! You really wanted to hit my head with that metal baton?! Idiot, someone could easily die from that kind of thing, you know?! Someone who's not even a *Killing Name* can't do something like that without hesitation! Are you crazy or what?!"

"....."

Miiko-san watched Kino-san's shameless and miserable screaming for just a moment before her gaze turned cold....

And she readied her second attack.

Of course, there was no such thing as an attack on a fallen opponent in kendo, but when it came to kenjutsu, it was a different story. In the first place, Miiko-san was a swordswoman before she was a kendoist.

"Hiiiiiiiii!"

With a pathetic scream.

Kino-san clumsily rolled to the side again.

The end of the baton hit the locker.

The stainless steel locker....

Was torn apart along the path of Miiko-san's sword.

".....Wai-hey, that's not funny!" With a loud voice, Kino-san continued to yell out. "I-I'll die! I'll really die! Tha-that fucking Mr. Fox, what was with his 'You'll absolutely not die.' This is fucked up!"

There's no way you'll die.....?

What's that?

What's the meaning behind that?

But Kino-san had no time to continue talking. He bent as if doing a somersault and began crawling through the cramped hospital room. He reached the door and tried to stand up, but as if his body was paralyzed, he failed. With a "Wait wait wait!" to Miiko-san who had already caught up and was about to swing down the baton at the top of his head, he raised his hands and showed his intent to surrender. It wasn't an act. Kino-san was really fearing Miiko-san and had tears in his eyes.

"I-it's a lie!"

"....."

"It's a lie, I said it's a lie! It's a bluff, I was joking about killing each other! I just wanted to say something cool! Even if I'm in the *Thirteen Stairs*, I'm not a fighter! Don't put me together with the *Niounomiya Siblings* you fought last time!"

".....No."

Even then, Miiko-san didn't loosen her stance.

"Maybe you're saying that to try and fool me."

"Wh-what?"

"Since I'm easy to fool, I need to be careful."

"How the fuck do you expect me to fool you in this situation?! Ah, no, I mean, how do you expect me to fool you?!"

Kino-san's choice of words had turned formal.

How should I say it, it was too pitiful.

It's not like I couldn't understand, but... yeah, even if you were to call it kendo, you still wouldn't typically see that kind of relentless focus on a person's vital points. Honestly, even I wasn't expecting it. Miiko-san's impulsiveness... It had been a while since I last saw it, but... now I understood the suffering Suzunashi-san typically had to go through.

But, even then.....

This was the *Thirteen Stairs*?

This was a member of the group trying to end the world?

“H-hey, that kid too, don’t just be silent and watch! You get it by watching, right? This Onee-chan is seriously bad news! You... do you intend to just sit there and let someone get murdered!?”

“Really, what did you come here for?”

I inadvertently interrupted Kino-san out of my usual habit. In response to those words, as if he suddenly remembered something, Kino-san searched through his pockets and took out a letter.

It was a white envelope.

Kino-san offered that envelope to Miiko-san.

“I-I just came... to deliver this.”

“.....”

“It’s a letter from Mr. Fox... to you.”

“.....”

“No, I was told that I could meddle a bit, so I wanted to confirm your condition... Th-that was my bad. I apologize. Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. A prank. It was a prank! O-of course it was a joke, *Ii-chan*! You were surprised, right?! Right?!”

“.....”

After a few moments of silence, Miiko-san let out a light sigh and finally took the envelope offered to her.

“Go.”

She said.

“What.....?”

“I will let you escape, so go.”

“Wh-what a generous person!” As if worshipping Miiko-san, Kino-san crossed his arms and went on his knees. “You are like a goddess! Truly godly! S-so this unworthy me, Kino Raichi, will let myself be spoiled by your words and–”

“Kino-san.”

“Y-yes?! What is it!?”

Kino-san was even formal with me.

He was a small fry to the point that it was sad.

It was weird coming from me, but it truly had been a long time since I’d seen such a small fry of a character. At the very least, it had been a few months. If this was a scene in a young adult fiction novel, he’d certainly be the type of character that wouldn’t get illustrated.

“You are... an ally of Mr. Fox, right?”

“.....”

As expected, the fact that not *Ii-chan* but *I* brought up Mr. Fox made Kino-san look suspicious. But ignoring that, without a moment's delay, I threw him a question.

"Why?"

"....Why what?"

Perhaps because the topic of the conversation switched to the fox-masked man, the pathetic feeling disappeared from Kino-san's voice and it instead became something heavy. I was about to feel timid, but I resisted that.

"That man... he said he wants to see the end of the world."

"....."

"A human being possessing that dangerous idea, the worst idea in the world... why would you follow someone like that?"

I couldn't ask Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan that.

Or Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan either.

I couldn't ask.

Why?

Why follow that man?

Why even think about sharing fate with a man like that?

"If the world ends, **your** place in it would disappear too, right? Maybe you could see the end, but at that time, you would end too. It's not like I can't understand the feeling of wanting to see the moment the world ends, but... ending means **not continuing**. It's not like you don't understand that, right?"

".....Hehehe."

Kino Raichi stood up.

He picked up the sunglasses that fell when he rolled earlier and put them back on. It made his expression unreadable. Following that, he picked up the chain too and wrapped it back around the waist of his half pants.

"Honestly, I have no interest whatsoever in the end of the world. I don't want to see the end. I don't care about that. It doesn't matter. The world? Why don't you leave it to America's president?"

"....."

"I'm just interested in Mr. Fox."

Kino-san opened the door and went into the hallway before turning back to look towards me and Ii-chan.

"It's nothing. I don't know about the other *Thirteen Stairs*, but as for myself... It's just that I'm in love with Mr. Fox."

With just the corners of his mouth, he smiled widely.

"Then, **if we have a connection, let's meet again**, *Ii-chan* and... probably that kid too."

The door automatically slid closed,
and Kino-san's figure could no longer be seen.
Once again, Miiko-san and I were the only ones left in the hospital room, as if we were trapped.
".....Fuu."
Miiko-san sighed, shrank the baton, and then, putting the baton in her mouth, she tore open the envelope she'd received from Kino-san without any hesitation.
"Wait, Miiko-san!"
"What?"
"Th-that's a letter to me, right?"
"I was the one to receive it."
"That's true, but....."
"I'm free to do what I want with my things."
"....."
"Hmm. Well, this too... is unwanted assistance."
While saying that, Miiko-san didn't do something as careless as throwing the torn letter in the trash. Instead, she opened the window and threw it outside. Recovery was now impossible by any stretch of the imagination.
.....No, well, even if I had received it, I'm sure I would've done the same thing as Miiko-san.
A letter from the fox-masked man.
And the *Thirteen Stairs*.
Kino-san.....
He said he wasn't a fighter.
Come to think of it, the *younger sister* of the *Niounomiya siblings*, Rizumu-chan, had no fighting ability at all, and yet she was an admirable member of the *Thirteen Stairs*. I see, I was too impressed by Izumu-kun. I thought that every other member would be like that, but that was definitely not the case.....
However.
That being said, Kino Raichi.
What was that guy.....
It's hard to say that he was fully capable of fulfilling his role as a messenger, and that feeling of being a small fry that he gave off was abnormal.

It was as though he was an underling.

Even if Miiko-san wasn't there, even if I were the only one to be his opponent, even though I was still currently hospitalized and my body was recovering, he was so much of an underling that I would've been able to evade him.

But……

Even then.

Even with that.

That being said… Kino Raichi.

"He wasn't ordinary."

Miiko-san said.

Yeah, that's right.

That figure rolling pathetically around the hospital room, begging desperately for his life towards Miiko-san who was holding her sword at the ready, even then….

I couldn't bring myself to look down on him.

It wasn't because he was a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*. That had nothing to do with it.

At that last moment,

When I mentioned the fox-masked man.

For him to be able **to say those lines**….

That was proof that Kino-san wasn't someone ordinary.

I looked around at the damage in the hospital room.

If you excluded the mess that was caused by Kino-san flailing around, the only damage done amounted to just the locker that was torn apart by Miiko-san's baton.

If it'd ended with just that, then it would have been fine, but…..

Obviously, I didn't think it would end with just that.

The end of it all had only just begun.

"……Miiko-san."

"Yes?"

After having closed the window, Miiko-san turned around.

Our eyes met.

I was a bit at a loss for words at the blank expression on her face.

“Ah, umm... because we made a lot of noise... you should leave before a nurse or someone else comes. If we’re not careful, you might end up banned from here.”

“I see. That’s true. As for the details, well, I’ll just not ask. If I heard them, I might want to do something else. Then... our conversation ended halfway through, but that’s how it is. When you get discharged, I’ll come back with Hou to help you.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah,” Miiko-san said, picking up her baggage. “Then.”

“Um... Miiko-san.”

“What?”

“No matter what, is it a no?”

Really... I was bad at giving up.

Even though it had already ended.

Even though Miiko-san had clearly stated the conclusion.

I was still, as always, afraid of the conclusion.

“....Hmm.”

Miiko-san faintly smiled.

“If you, to the extent that I wouldn’t have any room to meddle in, became a respectable guy, then certainly, it wouldn’t be an impossible thing. Then we wouldn’t both break each other and instead we could support each other. Instead of dragging each other down, we’d support each other.”

“That’s vague. Specifically, what do you mean by **respectable**?”

“Let me see. Specifically, huh.....” Miiko-san took her eyes off of me and looked up at the ceiling. “For example, like the guy just now, I guess... if you could puff out your chest and proudly say that you love someone else....”

“.....”

Instead of being liked by someone....

If I became able to say that I liked someone.

If I could love someone.

If I could do that earnestly, was that what it meant?

Liking someone.

In the end, it seemed like that was the flip side of being liked.

If you were liked by someone, then you’d grow to like that person as well.

If you were liked, then you’d become happy.

And because you were happy, you’d begin to like.

Then....

Was liking someone and being liked the same thing?

Then someone....

If I could say that I loved someone.

While puffing out my chest with pride.

If I could say those words.

I.....

What exactly would I become?

"Well then, rest well."

Saying that, Miiko-san showed her back to me.

The door opened and closed.

From one to two, then two to three, then losing one to two, gaining another to three, and then, after reducing again to two, in the end what was left... was one, huh?

Today was quite confusing.

And a lot of things had happened.

It seemed like three days had passed since Houko-chan wiped off my sweat... Ah, no, since Houko-chan came to visit me frequently, that might just have been my memory being confused.

Houko-chan.

Miiko-san.

Kino Raichi.

And... the fox-masked man, huh.

Today, even though it was sudden and unexpected, and even though it didn't turn out to be anything serious, getting Miiko-san involved should be seen as an opportunity.

The truth was, what I didn't like about what happened today, and what I didn't expect, was the fact that that man, Kino Raichi, called me Ii-chan.

Ii-chan.

It seemed like it was nothing, but it was an anomaly.

That's because, in my conversations with the fox-masked man last month, and even in front of Izumu-kun, Rizumu-chan, Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, I was never called by that nickname nor did I ever call myself that.

There were only three people who had called me by that name before and after that. Three people.

My little sister who had died.

A close friend who was no longer here.

And....

Kunagisa Tomo.

The fox-masked man.....

Had found his way to Kunagisa Tomo.

“.....”

Soon.....

Really, seriously.

The moment when I’d have to make a decision might come.

I couldn’t just stay like this, regardless of how it might look.

I couldn’t continue grumbling about trivial things, huh.....

“.....Ii~. If you don’t give me a good explanation, you won’t make it out of this hospital alive.”

I didn’t know if she had come to tease me after a bit of a delay because Houko-chan and Miiko-san were here, or if she simply came after hearing the noise. Regardless, the one who entered the hospital room without even knocking was the nurse Katanashi Rabumi, who was pointing at the destroyed locker with a forced smile.

Her shadow took the form of a demon.

“.....The piled up emotions of a young man hospitalized for a long time, as an example, can be taken out on this locker.”

“Go die.”

“Oh, um, Rabumi-san.”

“What?”

“I love you.”

“Then hand over your money.”

Hmm.

I see.

This was pretty hard to do.

ACT 2 – PRIVATE TALK

CHIGA HIKARI
TRIPLET MAID, SECOND DAUGHTER

0

There will always be hell in your heart.

1

September 21st.

For the time being, I was discharged from the hospital and, the next day,

I ended up meeting someone nostalgic.

If possible, I would've liked to have seen her sooner, but I couldn't do that while I was in the hospital, and she had various things she needed to deal with (she's a very busy person), so it got pushed back to today.

The meeting time was at ten in the morning.

The meeting spot was the stairs at Kyoto Station.

Just saying stairs is a bit too vague, but Kyoto Station has a ridiculously long staircase that continues straight up to the rooftop. There's also a stage at the bottom of the staircase, so the stairs also serve as seats for the audience. It's official name is, quite literally, the *Grand Stairway*, but the meaning is not well understood with just that, so the people around me started to call it the *Thousand Mile Staircase*.

The thirteenth step from the bottom.

Of course, it was me who chose that spot for our reunion.

".....You seem to be in a good mood, Onii-chan."

"Huh?"

"You seem to be in high spirits."

After finishing my early morning training with Miiko-san that I'd started as soon as I got out of the hospital, I went to a nearby public bath (open 24 hours a day) where I washed off my sweat and changed clothes. It was currently 9:00 a.m. If I took the bus, it would take about thirty minutes to get from Nakadachiuri to Kyoto Station. I felt it was a bit too early, but there was no problem in being too early. As I left the apartment, I met Houko-chan who was wearing a straw hat.

But, in high spirits.....

".....Well, first of all, hello, Houko-chan."

"First of all, good morning, Onii-chan."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm killing bugs."

"....."

You know.....

There are other ways to say it, like pest control.

"Onii-chan, are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah, an appointment."

"A date."

"It's not like that."

"But you're in high spirits."

"I'm not."

"Hiyah."

I received a low kick.

She hit my ankle splendidly and did a lot of damage.

".....What are you doing, Houko-chan?"

"With Onii-chan being in high spirits, I felt an intolerable strain on a fundamental part of my spirit, so I judged it to be an emergency situation and promptly dealt with it."

"That's the kind of explanation that doesn't need to be made....."

"You should get going," Houko-chan said, twisting her red lips ever so slightly. "Because we both have two legs and my stress hasn't yet fully dissipated."

"....."

Following Houko-chan's advice, I quickly left the front of the apartment and headed for the nearby bus stop.

I wonder.....

Setting aside whether I was in a good mood, Houko-chan seemed to be in a bad mood. Yesterday when we went to eat at Shinkyogoku, she seemed to have a lot of fun... I wonder, did she have a fight with Moeta-kun?

Anyways, girls her age made no sense to me.

That was also what I thought back when I was working part-time as a tutor.

Hime-chan was also quite hard to understand, but in a sense, maybe that wasn't actually something unique to her.

Well, there were still quite a few people who had reached the end of their years and still didn't make any sense.....

Age.

Time.

Stagnation.

Stoppage.

Acceleration, huh.....

"It's really nonsense....."

After a few minutes of waiting, I got on a bus to Kyoto Station. Since it was a weekday morning, the bus was full of empty seats. Without any particular reason, I sat in the front most seat.

The bus's engine.

A heavy bass sound.

As usual, the roads in Kyoto were full of traffic lights, so even though it wasn't particularly congested, the bus advanced slowly– (In cities, generally, bikes are a better means of transportation than cars)– with that, I reached my destination at the expected time.

9 and a half.

Since I hadn't eaten breakfast, I figured I'd get something in my stomach before climbing the *Thousand Mile Staircase*, but after thinking about it for a moment, I decided that I didn't want to be late, even if it was only by a few minutes, so I decided to put up with my hunger for a bit longer.

Well then……

I thought.

The problem, the most important problem here.

Was who exactly was coming.

That I didn't hear.

Although the time and place of the meeting was clear, when it came to **the person** I was waiting for, it was honestly uncertain.

Of course, I didn't care who it was. My big heart was ready to accept anyone with generosity, but……..

It's not like I didn't have hope.

If possible, I'd prefer it to be her.

Well, she was fine too.

But she was also hard to get rid of…….

"……"

No, I guess anyone was fine.

After putting an end to my meaningless train of thought, I entered Kyoto Station, took two escalators, and headed for the stairs.

At that point, it was forty past nine.

The person I was meeting was already there.

A camisole, a mini skirt and white loafers.

Holding a somewhat large suitcase with both hands.

Since it was a staircase that doubled as a place to sit on, it would've been fine for her to sit down and wait, but in that mini skirt, there'd certainly be some reluctance. She stood on the thirteenth step from the bottom, one step

above the first landing so as not to get in the way of others, with proper manners and good posture.

Her hairstyle was a bit different.

Maybe it was just for summer.

"……Hmm."

Since she wasn't wearing glasses, it wasn't her.

As for the two remaining possibilities, I wouldn't know until I talked to her. It was like a cat-killing doppelganger, I thought. When it came down to it, though, I felt like making it clear would be a waste… I'd like to enjoy this uncertain situation where both possibilities still existed a bit more.

And, while I was still hesitating to call out to her,

"Ah."

The other side noticed me.

"What, so you were already here. You should've called out to me sooner. You're mischievous." She came down the stairs and, after straightening up in front of me, bowed deeply. "It has been a while, but I'm glad to see that you're doing well."

"…….Thank you."

And, well, that's just the way it was.

The person waiting was Chiga Hikari-san.

Chiga Hikari….

She was one of the maids serving the master of Wet Crow's Feather Island, Akagami Iria. Besides her there were three more maids, the head maid, Handa Rei, (in other words, Hikari-san's boss), and Hikari-san's identical sisters, Chiga Akari and Chiga Teruko, who serve Akagami Iria.

April.

About half a year ago, I visited that island alongside Kunagisa Tomo and got involved in an absurd murder case. It wasn't as if Kunagisa or I were in any direct danger, but… the incident on that island, at least as far as I was concerned, happened during the period when I left the ER program and came back to Japan. It was now etched into my memory.

Memorable.

Anyway, it was memorable.

Still, I hadn't yet sorted it out.

Probably because it was a difficult case to understand.

It had no connection to something as understandable as a demonic killer or a professional killer, but, even then, it's not like it was something as incomprehensible as a middle school girl.

Not easy to understand.

It's not like I didn't know.

The part that was hard to understand.

In the end, the problem was the culprit, that person.

She.

She who had no name.

She who was without a name.

A nobody, someone who didn't even have a name.

Her way of thinking was the biggest problem.

But, well, I guess you could say that it was because of that incident that Kunagisa and I were able to meet with Aikawa Jun. Hence why I don't regret going to that island.

Not really.

But.

Even then....

Let's return to the main subject.

Anyway, at the very least I was sure that Rei-san wouldn't come, so I thought that the one I'd see today would either be Hikari-san, Akari-san, or Teruko-san. I had assumed that it would be Hikari-san, and that prediction was spot on.

"....."

But anyone could have predicted it.

Akari-san hated me as if I were a snake and Teruko-san had abandoned all communication with others.

"This is the first time I've seen you in plain clothes, Hikari-san."

"What? Ah, yes." Hikari-san nodded. "As one would expect, that maid getup would stand out in the city. When we leave the island, we wear plain clothes."

"Hmm. I see."

"Ah! But it's bad, isn't it?"

"Huh? What is?"

"No, according to what I heard from Tomo-san....." Hikari-san's cheeks turned slightly red and she said with great reluctance, "If I remember correctly, you like maid outfits....."

"That's a misunderstanding."

"So it was a misunderstanding?"

"Maybe there are some people like that in this world, but I'm not like that, so you don't need to worry."

I swear, Kunagisa says some outrageous things. It's not that I like maid outfits, I just respect the existence of maids. The clothing is, in the end, nothing more than a trifling matter, and a matter of attitude.

.....

No, that's just nonsense, isn't it?

"So, what will we do now? Hikari-san."

"Ah, yes. For now, let's go to a place where we can talk calmly. In this crowded place, even greetings are difficult."

"Talk calmly, is it... then where would you like to go? It's a bit early for lunch, but maybe we should go to a coffee shop for some light tea....."

"Ah, no." Hikari-san turned to my left. "The place has already been prepared by us."

"Ah, you are well prepared. As expected, I should say....." I nodded. "Then, where should we go now?"

"A hotel."

"What?"

"We have reserved a room at a hotel."

2

It was a normal hotel, of course.

The large international hotel in Karasuma Takatsuji. According to Hikari-san, this hotel was affiliated with the Akagami Conglomerate. It was the perfect environment to have a private conversation that you didn't want others to hear with someone.

That being said, Iria-san was already disconnected from the Akagami family, so we couldn't stand out too much. Hikari-san was also acting undercover this time, so we couldn't take the top-floor suite. Instead, we got a room with a double bed for normal customers.

I ordered a suitable meal from room service and as I was locking the door whilst waiting for it to arrive, Hikari-san sat down in a chair. Across the table from her, I took a seat on the bed which took up most of the room's space.

"Hmm... as I thought, the sun is strong on the mainland."

"Is that so?"

"Even though it's only been a few hours, my skin already hurts."

"Should we buy a jacket somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'm no longer at the age where exposing my skin is a service."

I had strong arguments against those words, but I didn't meet with Hikari-san today to talk about that.

And, as Houko-chan had said, this was definitely not a date, unfortunately.

I had something to do.

I came because I had something to do.

And that too, with each other.

"Well, let's start with you, Hikari-san."

"Ah, yes. That's right."

Hikari-san corrected her posture.

"Umm... I've got a lot to report, but, well, first of all, it's already become a formality, but I have a message from Ojou-sama."

"Won't I come again with Kunagisa to the island, is it?"

"That's it."

"I don't want to."

"Yes....." Hikari-san had a bitter smile. "I thought you were probably going to say that. It's just a formality."

"A formality, yes. Well, setting me aside... It's a bit rude to say it like this, but Kunagisa has already lost all interest in that island. Just taking that shut-

in out of her house is already a big task. Unless there's something really important, she won't move."

"Something important, is it?"

I'm in trouble, Hikari-san said as she tilted her head.

Cute.

"I think that Ojou-sama would be very delighted even if you came alone."

"Hmm....."

No, well.

I don't think it was a bad offer.

It's the perfect place to retire to.

The food is delicious and the rooms are clean.

And the maids.

I thought as I looked at Hikari-san.

"Still, it's a no."

"So it's no good."

As expected of a professional, even if it was just self concealment, she didn't show any signs of disappointment since it was just a *formality*.

"To tell you the truth, I wondered whether I should say this or not, but....." Hikari-san suddenly changed the subject. "But I'll report it to you just in case."

"Report? 'Just in case' is a strange phrase to use."

"Ojou-sama has entrusted me with the decision."

"Oh... that person did, huh. If that's the case, then certainly you can only say that it's *just in case*. There's no other way to express it. So what is it? Does that have something to do with what you just said?"

"Yes."

Hikari-san nodded with a strange expression on her face.

"Do you remember Himena Maki-san?"

"Forgetting her is impossible."

"She's been killed."

"....."

For a moment, I couldn't get any words out.

My lips stopped as I was trying to say something.

"As I thought, you didn't know. I thought that Tomo-san might have investigated it a bit, but...."

".....That's a joke, right?"

Himena Maki....

That person was killed?

Himena Maki.

An unprecedented fortune teller.

The past, present, and future were all in the palm of her hand.

There's nothing unknown to her.

There's no object that she can't see.

There's no sound that she can't hear.

On Wet Crow's Feather Island, the person who had further complicated the already complicated case, the one who saw the whole truth and just drowned herself in alcohol with a smirk on her face.....

Her dying is ridiculous.

It's just too ridiculous.

Even if it's a joke, I can't laugh.

If it's reality, then even more so.

"It was quite a while ago...." As if not caring about my disturbance, Hikari-san began to explain calmly. "About one month ago, that's when it took place."

"While I was still hospitalized... I see."

"Yes. It was a locked room case."

"Again?"

"Yes. How many times has it been... I don't want to count anymore."

".....Um, the cook... is she fine?" Last time she really lost her composure. I thought it finally ended, but for it to happen again... I don't think she has nerves strong enough for that. "The cause of death?"

"Beaten to death, it seems." Hikari-san said. "Specifically a cerebral contusion and blood loss. The corpse, it was really awful... to the point that I don't even want to remember it."

"Her insides were emptied and her brains were scattered around, right?"

".....You're well informed."

"I heard it all. From the person in question."

When we were leaving, she told me.

From her own mouth, the details of her own death.

As if she understood everything, along with a smile.

As if she gave up everything, along with a smile.

But the question remains.

At that time, I think she said that her *death* would come two years from now. Two years from now, on March 21st, at 3:23 p.m. That's what she said.

It's not even close.

That she was killed.....

No matter what, it's too abrupt.

"If I told her that, Kunagisa might start to say that she wants to go to that island again. Though, that's only if she doesn't already know." I said. "After all it's about Himena-san... and it's a locked room case."

"I think that too. But in this case, the one Ojou-sama wants to invite is rather Aikawa-san, so....."

".....Aikawa-san, huh... there's that problem too."

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

Red hair and a stylish suit.

A cynical and violent way of speaking, sanpaku eyes.

Ever since I got involved with the case on Wet Crow's Feather Island, I've had a good relationship with her, and been indebted to her, and caused a lot for her, but.....

Presently, her location was unknown.

No information had come to light on that person.

".....Right now, the Akagami Conglomerate is using every resource to track her down. But to tell you the truth, we haven't found any sign of her at this point."

"It seems like you're worried."

"Yes. Needless to say, Ojou-sama is heartbroken and I am too, though not as much. I just can't keep my calm. In fact, there seems to be some theories that she died mixed in with the investigation... In most cases, there's no need for someone like me to worry about Aikawa-san, but this time things are a little different....."

"....."

I had heard about Aikawa Jun's disappearance during my stay at the hospital.

On Sunday, August 20th, at the main hall of Kiyomizu Temple before dawn, the last footprints of Aikawa Jun were left. I say footprints, but rather, what was left there was the complete destruction of the place. Even now, one month later, it had still not yet been fully restored and remained closed to visitors.

The two who should have fought there.

Aikawa Jun and Niounomiya Izumu have both disappeared.

"*Killing Names,* was it.....?" Hikari-san mumbled. "I've served the Akagami family since before I can remember, so I've heard rumors about them... But I've always thought of them as a fairy tale."

“.....I actually saw two... no, *three*. More than just seeing them, I met them. That’s why, rather than a fairy tale, I’d say it’s more of a dream.”

A dream that’s definitely a nightmare.

Niounomiya Izumu, Niounomiya Rizumu, and one more.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

He’s currently missing too, and the chances of him being dead are strong.

But that being said.

Izumu-kun, Zerozaki, and of course, Aikawa-san too.

“They’re not the kind of people who’d die even if they were killed... It’s only a loss for us to worry about them. That may sound like I’m just trying to cheer you up or make you feel better, but that’s more than half of my true feelings.”

“Abnormal inhumans, is it?”

“That’s right,” I said, nodding to Hikari-san, who seemed unconvinced. “Well, to be honest though, the fact that Aikawa-san is missing at this point in time is a big problem for me. There was something I wanted to discuss with her, or rather, there was something I needed to discuss with her.”

“Something you needed to discuss?”

“Yeah. Or rather, something I need to tell her, I guess... well, that’s why I’ve taken the minimum steps to contact her, but.....”

“Yeah.....”

“By the way, um, about the case where Maki-san was killed... I think you also learned about Aikawa-san’s disappearance there, but... in the end, what happened? Were you able to find the culprit without Aikawa-san?”

“No... that’s... you see...” Hikari-san hesitated to say. “Unlike that time in April, it seems the perpetrator came from the outside.”

“An outside perpetrator?”

“That’s the conclusion reached based on the eyewitness testimony, items left at the scene, and the investigation of alibis. You see... we’re also pretty experienced.”

“.....Right.”

Even before that case in April, a lot happened.

Experienced.

It sounds bad, but it’s true.

“But what about the possibility that it was all a cover?”

“It’s not like there is none... but, in the first place, when the case happened there was almost no one on the island. Apart from the maids and Ojou-sama, there were only two other guests besides Himena-san.”

“Two.....”

One of them is probably that cook.

It’s unlikely that she’s the culprit, so the only one to suspect would be that other *guest*. If you could prove that person’s innocence, you’d have to conclude that the crime was committed by an outsider.

Hmm.....

As I thought, it’s a little too dumbfounding.

Too sudden, you could say.

The feeling that I can’t accept the fact that that bratty, evil fortune teller is dead was certainly still inside me.

Hmm.

A locked room murder, huh.....

“The story... well, please tell me the details later. Depending on the case, Kunagisa and I might visit that island one more time.”

“Ojou-sama wishes for that.”

“It’s ultimately up to Kunagisa to decide, though,” I said before taking a breath. “Then, next would be my request. Is that fine with you, Hikari-san?”

“Yes.”

Hikari-san said that and waited for my next words.

She looked prepared to deal with any situation.

Well, that’s to be expected.

In the first place, I was the one who requested this meeting. I’m sure Hikar-san had some business to attend to, like various formalities, but the conversation we’ve had up until now was about things that could’ve been discussed over the phone.

However, my business wasn’t something that could be done over the phone.

It’s something that can only be discussed in a hotel like this.

“I’m currently investigating a man.”

“.....A man.....?”

“His name is Saitou Takashi. He said he’s Aikawa Jun’s father.”

“.....”

It seemed I touched on a sore spot....

Hikari-san had that kind of expression on her face.

I can’t turn back now, though.

“While I was in the hospital, I began to look into it, but honestly, there’s a limit to what I can find out on my own. His family structure, his history... no matter what, I end up getting stuck on those points. And those records... they

completely stopped about ten years ago. The last ten years are completely unknown to me."

That's because Saitou Takashi is dead.

But...

There's no way that's the case.

If Saitou Takashi were dead....

Last month's case wouldn't have happened.

Hime-chan wouldn't have died.

"But Hikari-san. The history of Saitou Takashi that I've learned up to this point... there's no way it hadn't caught your master, Iria-san's, attention. Moreover, Iria-san has a connection with Aikawa-san. There's a *connection*. If you know something, please, would you tell me?"

".....So that was it."

Hikari-san sighed melancholically.

".....If you want to investigate something, wouldn't asking Tomo-san be a better choice? Tomo-san, and also her friend that I heard about. I'm sure they would be able to immediately find something of this level."

"I've thought about it."

When Kino-san attacked us....

I couldn't say anything carelessly.

Even if it was to stave off boredom or kill time, I couldn't say anything.

This time, I managed to get through it with just getting myself nearly strangled by Rabumi-san, but that doesn't mean next time will go so peacefully.

That fox-masked man....

If he really sees me as an enemy, I need to be prepared to deal with him too.

I've reached the limit of what I could do on my own.

"However, I can't involve Kunagisa in this, I just can't do it. I can't do it, or at the very least I don't want to. Honestly, this time the situation is so bad that I seriously can't joke about it."

"Hmm." Hikari-san looked suspicious. "I don't know... I suppose that's part of it, but it doesn't seem like that's the only thing."

"....."

She really has good instincts.

As a servant on that island, she's seen many inhuman abilities, so she must have experience.

“Well... the truth is, Kunagisa is also in a bit of a mess at the moment. It’s a problem within the Kunagisa Syndicate, the Kunagisa House, so it’s not directly related to Kunagisa, but her brother is a little... y’know.”

“Is it the kind of topic I shouldn’t hear about in detail?”

“Probably.”

“Then please say no more.”

“Yeah... I think that’s a wise decision. Well, I’m told that the trouble is about to come to an end, though....”

It seems like it’s some sort of rebellion within the organization, so it’s a story very far removed from Kunagisa or me, but for Nao-san, Kunagisa’s blood related brother, Kunagisa Tomo is something like an Achilles’ heel, so I’m in a situation where I can’t contact her carelessly.

As I recall, the rebellion happened at around the time when I was just hospitalized. Hmm... so in other words, it happened at around the time when Aikawa-san disappeared. Huh? Come to think of it, wasn’t Maki-san also killed about a month ago?

.....What is this? This coincidence.

It’s bizarre.

No, it’s not really that odd. It’s just that things overlapped to this extent.

It’s just a coincidence.

Of course it is.

“But it’s true that I don’t want to involve her. That’s more important to me. Well, to tell you the truth, I was also a bit reluctant to ask Hikari-san and the others. It’s just, with Kunagisa and Aikawa unavailable, there’s no one else to turn to.”

“.....Hmmm.”

Hikari-san folded her arms with a difficult look on her face.

She closed her eyes and wrinkled her brows.

When she makes a face like that, it reminds me of Akari-san and makes it a bit hard for me to call out to her.

“.....I guess I’m just relying too much on others, aren’t I?”

“No, I think that’s a good habit,” Hikari-san said. “Since you arrived on the island in April, I’ve noticed that you have a tendency to try to settle everything by yourself. It’s a good thing to rely on others.”

“I’m not very good at it. Being helped by other people.”

Miiko-san who fought off Kino-san.

I had some remorse, and I really think I’m sorry, but even then, I wasn’t really thankful.

To be honest, it's like I wasn't thankful at all.

Far from that, I'm even somewhat mad.

Why didn't she escape?

Why didn't she let me handle it?

Miiko-san.....

I want to blame her for her weakness.

She who can't help but help others.

That's probably different from kindness.

As she herself said, it's probably something more.

As I've always thought, Miiko-san's personality has roughly nothing to do with kindness. It was, in essence, an unshakeable and profound strictness which, as if contradicting itself, inevitably contained her sweetness within.

There is a difference between kindness and sweetness.

Our compatibility is good.....

That's certainly true. There's not many people in this world that are worth spoiling as much as me. But that's why the chemistry between us is the worst.

Well.....

Being able to strictly control herself without being swept away by the flow is the impressive thing about Miiko-san.

It's something impossible for me.

As Hikari-san says, I have a tendency to try to bear everything by myself, but that's just me controlling myself to the best of my ability. In reality, I'm someone who easily asks others for help.

That is the truth.

"It doesn't seem like it."

Hikari-san untied her arms and placed them on her knees.

"Setting that aside, even then... that question is pretty critical for you and me. You understand, right?"

"In my own way."

".....In your own way, then it's troubling....." Hikari-san had a really troubled look on her face. "In the first place, all I can tell you are trivial things. To the point that it may be better not to hear it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's more of a story of Aikawa Jun than a story of Saitou Takashi," Hikari-san said. "I guess it's a question of Aikawa-san's privacy."

"Yes... if it were possible, I would've liked to talk to Aikawa-san directly, too."

Now I regret that when I met with Aikawa-san before she and Izumu-kun had her match, I didn't tell her that I had met Saitou Takashi.

"What I want to know now, rather than what happened in the last ten years, is what happened during his two trips to America. When Saitou Takashi was involved with the ER3 and the ER2 system, what exactly did he do? In particular, if he really is Aikawa-san's father, then considering his age, what should be focused on is what he did the first time he went there...."

"Umm... about Saitou Takashi, I've never met him and I only met Aikawa-san a few years ago. That applies not just for me, but also for Ojou-sama too. The salon project was just in its infancy at that time, so please don't think that what I'm about to say is the absolute truth. It's just something that Oujo-sama and we researched out of curiosity. It's not something that we heard directly from Aikawa-san, and again, it's not like we confirmed it's veracity. It's nothing more than nonsensical and groundless rumors. It's just gossip. I hope you understand that."

".....Will you tell me?"

"I'm not really enthusiastic about it, but it probably can't be helped. Likely, this is...."

".....not unrelated to the fact that Himena-san was killed."

Badump.

My heart shook.

Those casual words shook me.

I wonder... what does it mean?

I didn't understand.

I didn't understand at all.

However, this isn't the kind of atmosphere that allows questions.

I could only be silent and wait for Hikari-san's words.

"Aikawa Jun, Humanity's Strongest Contractor."

Hikari-san began to speak in an unexpectedly fluent tone of voice. I swallowed and listened to her with bated breath.

"There exist three people that she calls father."

"Th-three?"

"Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya, and Saitou Takashi."

"....."

These names... I know them.

Kajou Akira.

Aikawa Junya.

The people who went to America with Saitou Takashi the second time.

The colleagues who later went on to found MS-2.

But the information about those two was exceedingly low. So low that it's abysmal. I couldn't find anything about them.

Speaking of which, the second man, Aikawa Junya.

His last name reads the same as Aikawa's. (TL : Junya's Aikawa 藍川 and Jun's Aikawa 哀川)

"Yes," Hikari-san nodded. "Aikawa-san's current name is probably something she inherited from that man."

"But three parents, I don't really get it... Do you mean fathers who raised her?"

"Yes, it seems Aikawa-san was raised by those three people. But of course, at that time she wasn't named *Aikawa Jun*."

"At that time... what do you mean?"

"Aikawa-san started to call herself *Aikawa Jun* after she started working as a contractor. About ten years ago."

"Ten years....."

I didn't know that she had been doing that for ten years. Speaking of ten years ago, I was about 9 and a half. I hadn't met Kunagisa, Nao-san, or Kasumioka-san, and on top of that... I didn't even know about the existence of my little sister yet.

Memories of my childhood that I didn't even want to remember.

No, I don't mind the memories.

That's right, speaking of ten years ago....

"That's right, ten years ago. Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya, and Saitou Takashi... they all passed away," Hikari-san said while looking down. "Official records state that all of them, including the daughter of those three, are dead and the culprit is unknown.... but, according to a reliable source, the one who killed those three was the daughter. In other words, that's Aikawa-san."

".....I didn't know that."

Patricide.

At that time Aikawa-san was in her mid-teens.

"Certainly, Aikawa-san must have been alive and not dead at that time. Then the possibility of that is high. So the sole survivor was the culprit.....?"

"It's just... there's no way to verify if the daughter those three raised is the *Aikawa Jun* we know."

“What do you mean ‘no way’?”

“I mean, there was no one there to witness it. If there was a person who knew the truth, then that could only be Aikawa-san.”

After saying that, Hikari-san closed her mouth for a bit.

It seems she was examining my reaction.

I didn’t falter.

“What about her real father? Is he among those three? Ah, no, that way of saying it might be weird in this case. I mean her *biological father*. Is it Saitou Takashi? Or is it that guy, Aikawa Junya?”

“That’s unknown.”

“Unknown……”

“Only, I don’t think she’s the biological child of Saitou Takashi. Because when he came back to Japan for the first time, he was appointed as a professor at Takatsu University. I presume you already know that much, right?”

“Yes. If it’s only that much.”

“……At that time, when he was living in the clinic, no one confirmed the existence of his daughter. There wasn’t even a rumor. Since it was the return of the prodigy from the ER2 System, the media were all over him, so if he had a kid, I don’t think he could’ve hid it.”

“But that’s in the case that they lived together, right?”

It’s possible that during his first trip to the U.S., he had a child and left it there when he returned home. I was surprised to see that the two names that came up during my investigation, Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya, were Aikawa-san’s fathers along with Saitou Takashi, but even then, I can’t imagine that there’s no blood relation between Aikawa-san and Saitou Takashi, that fox-masked man.

Because.

Their faces.

They looked very similar….

“……. Is there something?”

“Ah, no.” I tried to keep up appearances in a rush. “It’s nothing. Please continue.”

I couldn’t say something like that.

That I had already met Saitou Takashi.

If I said that, Hikari-san might get involved in the situation. I had no choice but to just listen to her story, but in reality, I was extremely worried. Right now, at this moment, even from this hotel’s window, I’m worried that a new assassin from the man with the fox mask might jump in.

Even if this hotel is protected by the Akagami Conglomerate, that fox-masked man... he was able to break through the Kunagisa Syndicate's guard with ease and at a pace so leisurely that they didn't even notice whether he was there or not.

No matter the guard you put up, it's not a matter of "if I do this much it should be fine," it's more like "if I do this much and it fails, then it couldn't be helped." It's only a way of making yourself feel better.

That's what that fox-masked man is.

"As for the mother, that too is unknown."

"But it's not like there isn't one. It's from over twenty years ago, so there's no way it's a test tube baby."

"Well, both her real father and her real mother exist, or at least they did. But in regards to Saitou Takashi, Kajou Akira, and Aikawa Junya, because of the reasons I stated earlier, we presume that they aren't Aikawa-san's real father."

"So what does it mean?"

"We think that she may have been an orphan in the first place. That's not something particularly rare in America. Maybe they raised a kid that they picked up from somewhere."

".....What's your basis?"

"No one knew about that kid during the *period when she was even younger*. Kids don't just suddenly grow, right? There's a process to their growth. That's what it is."

"....."

Her infancy didn't exist, is that it?

I see, that makes sense.

But...

I can't be satisfied with just that.

I have a reason to not be satisfied.

"....."

But setting that aside.

When it comes to this, there's a theory that we absolutely need to confirm. A theory whose authenticity I need to confirm. It's a frightening guess, it's a guess born from an unimaginable delusion. but if the fact is that Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya, and Saitou Takashi were all the fathers of Aikawa Jun....

Then I have to be sure.

"Hikari-san. Well, the *Four Gods and One Mirror* to which Iria-san's Akagami family belongs to have a strong link to the ER3 System, so maybe

you already know, but in that system, the MS-2 division did some pretty insane stuff. A *close friend* of mine was involved in it, so I know very well.....”

“.....Yes.”

“I was surprised when I investigated it. MS-2 is the division that Saitou Takashi built himself. At first,I thought it was that. You know, when you learn a new word, the frequency at which you see that word in books or in the newspaper explodes. I thought it was something like that kind of phenomenon. Words that you know are easier to spot, so even though the probability of them appearing doesn’t change, we end up thinking that it’s an amazing coincidence. I thought it was that kind of illusion, but....”

“.....”

“When it comes to this, it’s a different story. This isn’t a coincidence. I don’t like this word, but there’s a ***connection! There’s no other way to put it. It’s too good to be a coincidence. Please tell me, Hikari-san. Just one more thing. Was Aikawa-san involved with that division, the MS-2 in any way. No, was she involved?”***

“.....**It’s likely.**”

Hikari-san answered.

It was something awfully comical.

It made me feel like laughing at a high pitch.

What is this?

How convenient.

Absurdly inconvenient.

Are you saying that everything... it was all predetermined?

Are you saying it’s a fixed Story?

It makes me want to laugh.

It makes me want to laugh.

It makes me want to laugh.

It makes me want to laugh so much my guts are boiling.

In April, when I met Aikawa-san.

In May, when I met Zerozaki.

In June, when I met Hime-chan.

In July, when I met Utsurigi-san.

And in August....

Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan.

Encountering the fox-masked.

Are you saying it was all predetermined?

No, that’s not it.

Even earlier.

Much much earlier.

Meeting my sister.

And my sister's death.

Meeting Kunagisa.

And breaking Kunagisa.

And....

".....!!"

Meeting him and parting ways.

It's idiotic.

Everything is fixed.

Everything is stagnating.

Everything is breaking apart.

Like an anchor, a chain of the law.

Do you want to say it was all connected?

You're going to tell me that all of this until now was just foreshadowing, something that absurd.....

"Um...."

"....."

"A-are you fine? You look a bit pale...."

Fine?

Fine, you say?

If you're asking me if I'm fine, then of course I'm fine.

I was prepared for this.

I was prepared to face this kind of pain if I delved any deeper into the fox-masked man's past. When I saw the name of the ER3 System, and moreover, when I saw the name of MS-2, I had prepared myself.

But this is too awful.

I even feel malice.

I can't look, it's a farce.

I feel sick, I think I'm going to throw up.

This....

I couldn't make Kunagisa research this.

It seems like that was a blessing in disguise.

Well, I half-expected this outcome, as if it was obvious. I didn't want to get Kunagisa involved, and of course the infighting within the Kunagisa Syndicate was an important reason for that, but ultimately, I didn't want her to see this result, this conclusion.

I didn't want to see the current look on my face.

".....What nonsense....."

But like that, I finally understood.

I see... if it's like that,

then certainly, I am your enemy.

Saitou Takashi.

There was no mistake in your eyes.

Like always, like in all of my 19 years, I thought I was just going to get caught up in the middle, but just this once, that's not the case.

That's not the case here.

It's not just a problem of having a weird person set their eyes on me.

If you are Aikawa-san's father, and Aikawa-san is connected to MS-2, then it is a natural consequence that I, this user of nonsense, would be against you.

This is truly...

Retribution.

A bad cause, a bad effect, and reaping what you've sown.

"Hikari-san....."

"....What is it?"

I could feel something akin to fear towards me in Hikari-san's reaction. It's not like I didn't understand. I probably had that kind of look on my face.

"How interested are you... in the end of the world?"

".....I don't really get what you mean."

"Supposedly, this world has already existed for a mind-bogglingly large amount of time. If in this world that we're currently living in there was a time for it to end, if there was a final moment, would you like to see it, Hikari-san?"

"The world for me is just-"

Unexpectedly, Hikari-san answered immediately.

Without any pause.

Without taking a moment to think.

As if it were obvious, she answered, clearly and proudly.

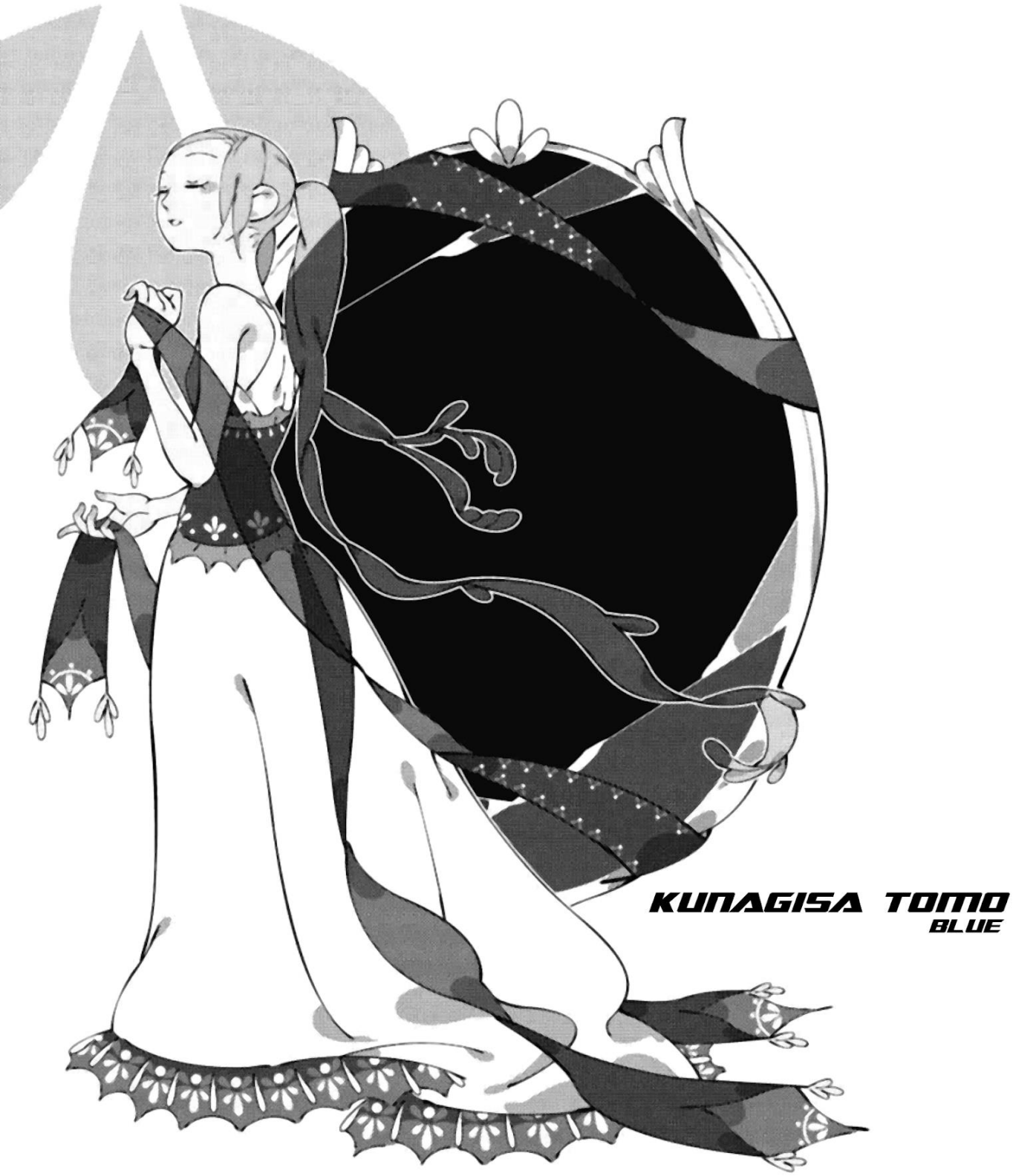
"Just the Wet Crow's Feather Island. Akagami Iria-ojou-sama is, for me, the whole world. I just serve Ojou-sama. Therefore, the end of the world is, in other words, the end of Ojou-sama. For a servant to want to see their master through to the end is natural."

"....."

I see... it's a splendid answer.

And it's most likely correct.
It's fine.
No doubt about it.
There's nothing wrong with it anywhere.
"Hikari-san."
"What is it?"
"I love you."
Hikari-san smiled.
"Thank you very much."
That too was a flawless answer.

ACT 3 - RECOVERY OF MEMORIES



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At the point where someone becomes a sacrifice, there's no happiness.

1

Now I can honestly admit that the Kunagisa Syndicate had set their eyes and called out to me, who was at the time nothing more than a middle schooler in the countryside who was just exceedingly and naturally going along with the flow.

The Kunagisa Syndicate.

Boasting the names of Ichigai, Nishiori, Sanzaka, Shikabane, Gotoride, Rokukase, the seventh name skipped over, and lastly Hachikiri, it oversees the monstrous community of these organizations set up all over Western Japan. Saying that it governs a quarter of the world wouldn't be that far fetched. It's the kind of organization that had created such a reality a long time ago.

It's headquarters are in the southeastern part of Hyogo Prefecture, in the cities of Kobe, Nishinomiya, and Ashiya.

I used to live in a hot spring resort town in Kobe, so you could say that I was born and raised mostly under the control of the Kunagisa Syndicate. The only way to describe it is that everything was set up by the Kunagisa Syndicate. But in most cases, when it comes to organizations that are too large, they become something like a religion or the state, an existence that you aren't particularly conscious of. That was the case for me back when I was a child.

However, that wasn't the case on the Kunagisa Syndicate's side.

At the very least, they weren't unaware.

They were aware.

They were overwhelmingly aware.

Aware that they were the rulers.

And they were prepared.

Overwhelmingly prepared.

At that point, I wonder...

What about me?

When I was 13 years old at that time, did I know myself?

No, not just myself.

Was there even one thing I knew?
Was there even one thing that I really, truly, knew with certainty?
Did I know?
The answer is, of course, *I didn't know*.
However, I did feel unsatisfied.
I felt doubt.
Even If I wasn't aware of the answer, I was aware of the question.
Because at that point, my little sister was dead.
Why is that.....?
I wonder why.
Why do people die so easily around me? Why is it that accidents happen so easily around me? Why does everyone around me only fight each other?
Why compete?
Why hate?
Why waver?
Why sorrow?
Why doubt?
Why loathe?
Why curse?
And why kill?
Everyone is crazy.
I thought that while pretending to be innocent myself.
I was an unpleasant child.
I looked down on my surroundings and felt good about it.
Pretending to be a bystander like a loser.
Thinking that I knew everything when I was more ignorant than anyone else.
That was me at 13.
That being said, I think I was more diligent back then, when I hadn't yet learned how to use nonsense, compared to the current me.
Because I was diligent,
I ended up being noticed by the Kunagisa Syndicate.
Again, that wasn't a coincidence, of course.
If anything, it was...
Only natural.
Naturally, the Kunagisa Syndicate called out to me, and I...

Like a miracle, I met Kunagisa Tomo.

“……”

Human happiness.

The condition of happiness.

Perhaps there exist some people who have never thought deeply about those concepts, but as long as they live in this world, it’s impossible to avoid it entirely. It would be unbelievably difficult. Saying that no one wants to be unhappy might not be exact. Rather, if we take happiness as a simple antonym for *unhappiness*, then we can define it as *wanting to be less unhappy.*

Because they don’t want to be unhappy, they make an effort.

Because they don’t want to be unhappy, they don’t make an effort.

If you think about it like that, it becomes easier to understand.

People are just too, too normal to want to live. Too obvious. Therefore, instead of wishing for life, they think about avoiding death and arrive at the foolish misunderstanding that that is life.

Arrive.

Fall.

If that’s a misunderstanding, though, then it’s really comical.

There is comfort in the status quo because it doesn’t make you more unhappy. Leaving possibilities and options to the last minute, without achieving results, is also less unhappy.

However, this argument is not enough for the world.

You can’t reach the world with this argument.

Because as I’ve always thought, happiness and unhappiness, like hope and despair or love and hate aren’t simple, unremarkable antonyms that can be described as a simple, unremarkable dualism.

Happiness and *unhappiness*, *fortune* and *misfortune*. In other words, it’s a mysterious state of contradictions and paradoxes harmoniously blended together.

A vague, pre-defined state like that certainly exists.

For example,

yes, this current me.

Borrowing the Fiat from Miiko-san, I was currently heading to Shirosaki, the highest class residential area in Kyoto, where Kunagisa lives as a shut in. That’s the current situation.

I think that going to see Kunagisa is happiness. Well, for the time being, it wasn’t a hindrance.

But for example,

if Houko-chan was sitting in the back seat,
and if Hikari-san was in the driver's seat,
Then I wouldn't understand anything.
"....."
Why are they here?
Why are they still here?
"Hmm? Is something the matter?"
Hikari-san looked away from the windshield for a moment and smiled at me. I said, "no, it's nothing," and looked at the back seat in order to escape Hikari-san's gaze. There, Houko-chan was sleeping like an angel. Houko-chan has a habit of falling asleep when riding in a vehicle. It's the same whether she's riding in a car or a train. I think it's bad for a pretty girl like Houko-chan to carelessly fall asleep in a train, but since it's a habit, it probably won't be fixed. Even though we're not that far from Shirosaki, if she falls asleep now, I don't think she'll be able to wake up in time.
Rather, the problem was Hikari-san.
Why is she here?
Why is she driving the Fiat?
Why am I in the passenger seat?
And why is she in a maid outfit?
"....."
I knew it was weird to begin with. I had a feeling that her luggage was too big for a day trip. I didn't expect that she had the complete set in that trunk, though.
What I heard was that Iria-san was at the limit of her patience.
Apparently she ran out of patience for me, who kept refusing her invitations to come to that island. Knowing that Ojou-sama's character, the words "at the limit of her patience" had a very serious meaning. They were so frightening that they sent chills down my spine.
And that's when a certain individual gave her some advice.
"That Nonsense User is a terrifying maid enthusiast, so if you lend him one of your maids for a trial period, I'm sure that in ten days he won't be able to bear it and will come to the island."
In other words, from their point of view, their invitation for me this time was a godsend.
But who here is a maid enthusiast?
There's a limit to how rude you can be.
It makes me want to sue that person for defamation.

I thought it was some sort of will left behind by Maki-san before she died, but that wasn't the case. It was the suggestion of one of the two geniuses who were on the island when Maki-san was killed from Hikari-san's story, the one that's left when you take the cook out of the equation.

That someone.

It was Kasugai Kasuga.

"That woman……"

Is she trying to return the favor?

She was a pain in the ass up until the day she left.

……

It's a nice place, she said.

After leaving the hotel on the 21st, Hikari-san didn't take the train out of the city, but instead took the bus with me to the antique apartment.

"I apologize for this being like a sneak attack."

That's what Hikari-san said on the bus, but "like" isn't the most suitable expression in this case. It was a superb sneak attack. It was perfect, as if it was a surprise attack from Wakayama prefecture. (TL: Might be a reference to the ***Shōninki*** from the Kishū province in Wakayama)

A private conversation.

Exchanging information with one of the residents from Wet Crow's Feather Island.

I was prepared for some risk, but…..

"……This looks like it's going to be very rough…."

Standing in front of the antique apartment, Hikari-san had a shocked expression on her face.

"Honestly, I never imagined that you would live in such a run down place."

Her arms were shaking violently.

It looked like she was trembling with excitement.

Hikari-san was a neat freak.

She really liked to clean.

Unexpectedly, she might've been the right person at the right place.

"But Hikari-san. Are you serious?"

"Yes, very serious."

Hikari-san clenched her fist tightly.

"Please let me call you Master!"

"……"

……It was a splendid blow.

Well, that's why...

Following Kasugai-san from last month, this month's roommate was Chiga Hikari-san. It felt like I couldn't argue against whatever Miiko-san had to say about it. No, Miiko-san didn't say anything in particular, but Nanananami had a lot of sarcastic remarks for me. It was humiliating to let her say what she wanted, but I resigned myself to it. I couldn't help it.

That was also how I felt in regards to Hikari-san.

I won't explain further than that.

Then, returning to the main subject, today.

The 26th of September.

I was summoned by Kunagisa Tomo.

I received a call early in the morning. As usual, I couldn't make any sense of what she was trying to say when having a conversation over the phone, but if I were to use a bit of imagination, it seems that infighting within the Kunagisa Syndicate had been completely resolved as of yesterday. At the same time, the heavy guard that was on Kunagisa Tomo was reduced to a slightly lower level, so it was finally possible for her to see me after a long time.

Seeing Kunagisa Tomo is a sort of happiness.

Without comparing it to anything,

you could say without a doubt that it's happiness.

But when looking back at the situation, I wonder.

I was in a position to be targeted now.

The more people I meet, the more people I'll get involved.

Then, in that sense, when it comes to Hikari-san, I should've forcefully turned her away. Not to mention, usually when it comes to Kunagisa, when something happens, it's fatally bad. It goes without saying, but I don't even want to think about it.

But.

Being told by Kunagisa "I want to see you," being told "I have to talk to you,"my will wasn't strong enough to turn her down.

And there was also a real problem.

I can't just focus only on Saitou Takashi. I also have something I need to think about when it comes to Kunagisa Tomo.

Things I had left aside for a long time.

From one month ago, or perhaps, from six years ago.

Maybe now is a good time.

That's what I thought.

“.....It’s nonsense, though.”

In the end, I didn’t want to turn down her invitation, and I wanted to get there as soon as possible, so I decided to take the Fiat rather than the Vespa to Shirosaki, but....

“Even if it’s just the steering wheel, I can’t let master hold anything heavier than chopsticks.”

Hikari-san said.

“Since Nonsense User Onii-chan’s recent behavior has been too much for me to handle, I’ll have to place you under my supervision for a while.”

Houko-chan said, so naturally she came along.

.....

Again, what is this situation?

This is what Miiko-san calls “being popular”?

Even then, it’s not a very welcome way of being popular.

“.....But Kasugai-san... I wondered where she went, but the fact that she ended up at Wet Crow’s Feather Island.....”

Certainly, for that social misfit, that place might be paradise. The only problem was that there were no young men who were to Kasugai-san’s tastes. Come to think of it, when Kasugai-san was staying at the apartment, I accidentally leaked some information about the island. If I remember correctly, Kasugai-san left on the night of the 21st of August. So she left for that island right after that?

As always, I couldn’t read her.

“If that was the case, then please tell me earlier.”

“Yes but, how should I say it... Kasugai is the kind of person that’s hard to bring up.”

I understood that well.

It was just as Hikari-san said.

Well, but just like that, that one mysterious doubt that I had on my mind had been cleared. **Because** Kasugai-san went to that island, Hikari-san could generally predict what I was going to ask her. Kasugai-san was involved considerab;y in the last case, and she knows what I’ve done in the last six months.

So she might have predicted it in advance.

That I wanted information on Saitou Takashi.

I think that’s why Hikari-san was prepared beforehand. That’s why she could give me that much information without much hesitation, as if she was already prepared.

Well...

Even if she was prepared,

she probably wished that guess was wrong.

“.....That means as soon as Kasugai-san came to that island, Maki-san was killed?”

“That’s right,” Hikari-san nodded. “But while I shouldn’t make these kinds of statements based solely on speculation, I don’t think Kasugai-san is the culprit.”

“Probably.”

That person isn’t the type who would kill someone.

She doesn’t have that kind of notion to begin with.

To let live or to kill, that choice doesn’t exist.

She chose not to choose.

“So it’s an outsider.....”

On an isolated island, that possibility is normally unlikely.

But Maki-san... she seemed to have bought a lot of grudges, so finding a suitable culprit shouldn’t be hard. Even I didn’t get along with her. Rather, during the week when I stayed at that island, we constantly argued with each other.

That’s why when I heard that she died, I only thought it was abrupt, and honestly, this might seem cold, but I didn’t feel any sadness or pity for her.

That was no surprise.

That’s the kind of person I am in the first place.

But.

I had a doubt.

There’s no way that person was killed.

At the very least, it shouldn’t have happened for another year and a half.

After that, Hikari-san gave me some details about the situation in the closed room where Maki-san was killed, but to be honest, I didn’t really understand.

The scene of the crime was Maki-san’s room.

In April, when Kunagisa and I visited, the door and windows in Maki-san’s room were covered with thick boards hammered in with large nails from the inside. It looked like she was preparing for a typhoon.

If a person dies in a locked room, it’s clearly a suicide.

But the way she died clearly points to a murder.

Having her insides torn out and her brains splattered about.

“.....Hmm.”

When we parted in April, she said.

When the time comes, you should pursue the one that killed me.

I wonder.

If she knew everything beforehand, then didn't she know the identity of the person who would kill her? It's strange. Why did she choose to get herself killed without any resistance.....?

Did she sacrifice herself to destiny?

Did she sacrifice herself to the Story?

No... wait.

If it's a story, then....

Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative.

Whether it's two years or six months later, it's the same thing, and no matter who the culprit is or who they're not, it's the same thing... Is that what it is?

.....If so.

The Story is accelerating.

If it comes to that, her predictions can no longer be relied upon.

I see, so that's her root.

She knew everything and yet didn't say a word.

Good grief. Now I'm sure of it.

I'm sure of it now.

Himena Maki-san.

I really hate you.

"We're almost there."

Hikari-san said. Looking ahead, I could clearly see the thirty-two-story apartment building that Kunagisa used as her base. Being able to get here without getting lost even though it was the first time she's ever been on this road was a difficult task, so I complimented her on that.

"Thank you," Hikari-san said with a shy smile. "Driving a car is a lot easier than I thought. It was easier than I was worried about."

"....."

Rather than it being the first time she took this road, it was her first time driving.

Come to think of it, you don't really get a chance to drive a car on an island like that... Wait, was she driving without a license?

"Where should I park?"

“Unlike with a motorbike, we can’t really park on the road, and this is also a borrowed vehicle. This’ll be awkward and I don’t like it, but since we can’t really turn back, please go into the underground parking lot.”

“Understood master.”

“.....”

“? Is something the matter, master?”

“.....”

“Have I done something wrong, master?”

“.....”

It was kind of embarrassing.

It was a word that pierced through my heart.

But I wanted her to say it more.

After entering the underground parking lot of the apartment building, Hikari-san splendidly parked backwards next to the luxury cars of the other residents and then stopped the Fiat’s engine.

Hikari-san said she’d wait in the car.

Houko-chan didn’t wake up and Hikari-san felt hesitant about leaving a child alone in an empty car. Since that child was Houko-chan, I felt the same. Though, since Hikari-san and Kunagisa were close on that island, I thought it’d be better if they met.

“You haven’t seen Tomo-san for a month, right?”

“Yeah, well, that’s right.”

“I won’t ruin the mood between you two, then.”

“.....”

“Take care, master.”

And so.

That’s why I was alone from here.

Setting Hikari-san aside, it was a fortuitous thing that I didn’t have to introduce Houko-chan to Kunagisa. No, it’s not like I had something to feel bad about. Well, somewhat.

I took the elevator from the underground parking lot to the 32nd floor, where Kunagisa lives. Since we were checked out by the guard when we entered the parking lot, Kungisa should know that I’m coming. The time now was approximately 10 a.m.

Not bad.

Using the fingerprint scanner and a key, I opened the door. I searched for Kunagisa while avoiding the cables on the floor, ceiling, and walls that seemed to have multiplied in number since the last time I was here. They

could only be described as a living creature. It's like they were burying themselves into the hallway. There were a lot of rooms in this gigantic apartment, so finding Kunagisa's small body within it was pretty hard.

Then.

".....Eh?"

I was surprised.

Kunagisa was in a room that hadn't yet suffered much mechanical encroachment with only just a sofa, a table, a huge plasma TV, and no carpeting in it, but....

She wasn't alone.

There was one other person.

"Ah, it's Ii-chan!" Turning back, Kunagisa Tomo showed me a beaming smile. "Ahahahaha! As I expected, you look really surprised!"

".....That's... well."

I answered back to Kunagisa and then looked at the other person. They were looking at the TV screen, but there wasn't anything displayed on it besides the reflection of the person's face.

I know this person.

I thought I would never see her again....

I know who this person is.

".....It seems..."

She said.

She said like that.

She... said.

"It seems like you've grown a little, boy"

".....Akane-san....."

No, that's wrong.

It wasn't Sonoyama Akane.

It wasn't Sonoyama Akane, one of the Seven Fools of the ER3 system, *one of the people closest to the answer to this world*.

Akane-san died on that island.

On that island, in April, she was killed.

Killed and decapitated in a locked room.

Sonoyama Akane is no more.

The one here is....

The one who committed the act of murder on Wet Crow's Feather Island

As a result, two people were slaughtered.

She killed Sonoyama Akane and then became Sonoyama Akane.

She who became her.

She whose name I didn't even know, she who is nobody.

"Akane-san is fine. I'm still calling myself that for now," she finally took her eyes off the TV screen and turned them towards me. "It's been a while, hasn't it? You look different, boy. You've really matured and grown into a reliable man."

"It's been... a while."

"You don't have to be so prepared. I didn't come to cause any harm to you or Kunagisa-chan. You should know better than anyone that I'm not that kind of person."

"That's right. She came to play."

Kunagisa said in such a cheerful tone that it felt out of place.

"She said she came back to Japan the day before yesterday."

".....How should I say this....." I muttered to myself while taking a seat on the sofa next to Kunagisa. ".....It feels like I'm seeing a ghost this early in the morning."

"A ghost, huh. It seems you've hit the nail on the head with that metaphor. It's a fitting way to describe me," she laughed. "But I'm glad to see you again, boy."

"....."

Akane-san's way of speaking.

Akane-san's attitude.

Akane-san's mannerisms.

The woman who spoke was, completely, Sonoyama Akane.

I wondered how such a thing was possible.

What happened in April...

Even after the truth of everything was explained to me by Aikawa Jun, even after I was told about the existence of the woman who could become someone else, some part of me remained unconvinced.

I had some reservations.

I wasn't relieved.

But if you see the real thing in person.

If you see it right in front of you, you just have to accept it.

She who was nobody, she who didn't have a name,

at this moment,

only at this moment,

The member of the Seven Fools who was decapitated on that island.

She was Sonoyama Akane herself.

“Don’t look so grim. Though, *I* am the one telling you that. But, well, it’s fine. Don’t worry, don’t worry, boy. I’m about to go home, anyway.”

“.....You’re going home?”

“Yeah. The show just finished.”

It seems that the TV had just been turned off.

The nameless woman stood up.

“Then, Kunagisa-chan, I’ll take my leave.”

“Yeah, bye bye, Akane-chan.”

Kunagisa nonchalantly called her by the name of Sonoyama Akane. She called her by that name, as if the woman who wasn’t Akane-san was actually Akane-san. What does that mean? It’s not like she doesn’t understand, and yet she still exchanged words with her with a smile.

It was all the same to her.

It made me realize.

Once more, it made me realize.

Someone like me couldn’t match up to these two.

“Ah, right, right.”

Just when she was about to leave, she turned back.

“Boy, just one thing, I’ll let you in on something interesting.”

“.....What is it?”

“Who I’m trying to become next.”

She smiled mischievously.

“Soon, I’ll be tired of calling myself Sonoyama Akane. I’ll lose interest in the existence of Sonoyama Akane. After three more months, I’ll be done with this name.

“.....You get bored more quickly than I thought.”

“I’m greedy.”

She said plainly.

“My next target is Aikawa Jun.”

“.....!”

Kunagisa didn’t seem particularly surprised.

Maybe she’d already heard it.

But I couldn’t hide my shivers.

“Her uncovering my plans back in April is still fresh in my mind. It was a first for me. How could I, this me, have my thoughts traced by someone else?”

“.....”

From the point of view of herself, who had made tracing other people her purpose in life, it was probably humiliating.

“So I think I’ll become her next time.”

“That’s absurd.....”

I lowered my gaze and muttered.

“There’s no way you can do that.....”

“What makes you say that?”

However, she wasn’t frightened at all.

It was just like when we talked on that island.

Déjà vu.

“According to my research, Aikawa Jun seems to be missing at the moment. Nobody knows where she is. No one can determine whether she’s still alive or not. That’s how it is, boy. Aikawa Jun is nowhere to be found, right? If you’re not there, then you don’t exist. With conditions this good, it’ll be a lot easier than it was in April. After all, I won’t have to kill the real thing.”

“No... but...”

But Aikawa-san.

Aikawa Jun is Humanity’s Strongest Contractor.

“Aikawa Jun, Humanity’s Strongest Contractor... I feel something close to myself in her, boy. I erase myself completely, and my ultimate goal is to replace someone else. That’s what my life is all about. Meanwhile, Aikawa Jun is always a *contractor*, always someone’s alternative, someone else’s substitute. She’s just like me.”

The woman who becomes someone else.

The woman who represents someone else.

There **is** a common point.

Then is it possible?

For this nameless woman, this nobody.

With her ability, with her talents,

to replace Aikawa Jun.

“You know, boy, humans...”

She said.

“Essentially, they can become whatever they want to become.”

“.....”

“I’ve already talked about what kind of dissatisfaction you have with who you are back on that island, and as a result, your current appearance is the future you that you had wished for back then.”

My future self.

My future self, as seen from the past.

“But my view of Aikawa Jun is not like that. She’s surely just like me. Similar to me and also the same as me,” she said as if gloating. “However, she surely doesn’t want to become anyone.”

“……Doesn’t want to become anyone.”

“If you don’t want to become anything, then you can become anything.”

Not being bound by what you want to be.

Being able to become everything.

Being able to be everything.

“This is something that I always think when I want to become someone else, so don’t think too much of it, but right now, I’m certain that I was born to become Aikawa Jun.”

“……”

“Goodbye. We won’t meet again.”

Those were her parting words.

The woman whose name I didn’t know, and who was nobody, left.

Turning her back towards me and without looking back, she left.

The sound of the front door opening and closing.

All at once.

I lost all the strength in my body.

I thought my legs had given out.

“……Hey.”

As if taking it out on her, I glared at Kunagisa.

“If she’s here then say it. From the look of things, she was already here when you called me.”

“Sorry, sorry. I wanted to surprise you.”

Kunagisa didn’t seem to feel bad at all.

Probably because that’s really all there was to it.

When she thinks that something might surprise me, she surprises me.

Kunagisa likes this sort of bad prank.

Without thinking it’s in bad taste or that it’s even a prank.

“No, well, there was also that Akane-chan wanted to see Ii-chan too. Since it was a special occasion, I set for the time of the two meetings to overlap.

“Set, huh……” I hung my head. “Well, she also probably waited for the guard around Kunagisa to loosen, so in that sense this meeting was inevitable. So what the hell did she want, anyway? I assume she didn’t come just to watch TV on a big screen or just to see our faces, right? Did she actually harm you?”

“It’s okay,” Kunagisa smiled. “She just asked me a couple of questions about Jun-chan.”

“About Aikawa-san……?”

“Looks like Akane-chan is serious,” Kunagisa said, closing one eye and sticking out her tongue. “Boku-sama-chan has the same opinion as Ii-chan, I think it’s impossible. That’s what I said, but it felt like she didn’t listen. Like preaching to the deaf or lecturing the Buddha.”

“Those two sayings have completely different meanings.”

“But it’s the same phenomenon.”

“Well, yeah, it’s the same thing. Anyway, whether she’s deaf or the Buddha, it has no connection to us.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

In the end.

It’s her and Aikawa Jun’s problem.

Since the incident in April was, in the end, a confrontation between the two of them, there was no room for me or Kunagisa to get involved.

It’s unrelated.

I can probably just say that.

While being powerless.

While being apathetic.

“Tomo, well, I’ll ask just in case, but you’re… no, it’s you we’re talking about here. Do you know where Aikawa-san is right now and what she’s doing? Even if you don’t know now, can you find out by seeking it? I’m not asking you to find out, I’m just asking whether you can or not.”

“Hmm. I don’t know. I think we should take everything about Jun-chan as an exception, so I can’t really be certain. I could ask Chii-kun, but no matter how much of a seeker he is, Jun-chan is… Chii-kun might hide it on purpose. If Jun-chan is hiding of her own will, no one can find her.”

“Hmm…..”

“I also said that to Akane-chan earlier too, but in my personal opinion, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was dead. It’s not like Jun-chan is an immortal monster.”

“She is a monster. That person.”

“She’s not a monster, she’s a human being.”

“……Well, that’s right, but…”

As usual, or rather, how should I put it, she’s always very dry about that kind of thing. After all this time though, I’m not surprised.

She could be dead. That’s true.

A death theory.

She and Niounomiya Izumu killed each other at the same time.

If that's the case, then...

That would be her field of speciality.

It's unrelated. That's all I can say

While being powerless.

While being apathetic.

"Well, setting that aside, Tomo. Thinking about it, it's pretty rare for you to call me here. Do you need something?"

"Is it bad to call you here without needing something?"

"It's not that, but recently I've been in a maelstrom of trouble...."

"As usual."

"Well, it's as usual, but...."

That's right, it's as usual.

It's something that's been going on for a long time.

It's something that began a long time ago.

"Well, let's see. Yes, I have a request. Or rather, it's news that'd be good for Ii-chan to hear."

"Good news?"

"No, no, it's news that you should hear. Whether it's good news or bad news, that's for Ii-chan to decide."

".....I'll hope that it's good news," I said. "Is it something related to the Kunagisa Syndicate? "

"Well, yeah, but at the same time it's also about Boku-sama-chan," Kunagisa said. "Umm, I told you over the phone that the conflict within the organization ended yesterday, right?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I only heard that it ended, so I don't know anything concrete. What happened? Even if it wasn't something like six years ago, there was a lot of damage, wasn't there?"

"Uni. No, aside from the beginning, it seems that almost nobody has died since we entered September. It's a miracle."

"Hmm. Well, I am somewhat interested, but first, setting all of that aside, I'm worried about Nao-san. Is he fine?"

"Speaking of the conclusion..."

Kunagisa laughed innocently and with satisfaction.

"Nao-kun began his new job as the head of the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"....."

"Ta-dhaa!"

From secretary of the leader to leader.

That's quite a big promotion.

Since Nao-san is a direct descendant, I always thought he would eventually rise to the position of leading the Kunagisa Syndicate, but I always thought that was still a few decades away.

"I haven't heard any of the details, since Boku-sama-chan isn't interested in them either, but it seems that Nao-kun was able to take great advantage of the infighting."

"Hmm... go on."

"Right. So now Nao-kun controls a quarter of the world. Scary, scary." Kunagisa declared that absurd fact as if she was having a lot of fun. "Therefore, Boku-sama-chan is now able to reconcile with the Kunagisa House."

".....Is that so?"

I was a bit perplexed.

Rather than being surprised, I was perplexed.

Even if Nao-kun became the head of the Syndicate, is it really something that simple? The separation between the Kunagisa House and Kunagisa Tomo wasn't something that simple. Even if Nao-san is obsessed with Kunagisa Tomo to the point where you could call it insane-

"It's fine," Kunagisa said. "Because of the conflict, everyone except Nao-kun retired."

"Retired.....?"

"Well, some were seriously injured and some weren't, but still they all retired of their own will. The only person currently left in the Kunagisa House is Nao-kun. That's why **something can be done**. It seems that even before this happened within the organization, the people who wanted to bring back Boku-sama-chan, who is a direct descendant, outnumbered those who were against it"

"....."

"Though it's not anything official yet."

".....Your father, your grandfather, your grandmother, and the rest of the family... so all of them retired... it really makes you feel the passage of time."

It was a blunt way of putting it.

For me, six years ago, that was still the present.

But now it was completely the past.

That's right.

After all, it was six years ago.

The more I thought about it, the more futile it became.

“.....After going back to the Syndicate, what will happen? Will you have to go back to Kobe?”

“Hmm? Nothing will change. It’ll be as always. My pay will just get better, I guess.”

“So you intend to receive even more pay.....”

“And I like Kyoto.”

Kunagisa lightly swung her shoulders.

“Ii-chan also seems to like Kyoto.”

“I... not really, anywhere is fine. If you go back to Kobe, I’ll go back with you.”

“So you’ll follow me?”

“Of course. I’m from that area. I’ve been ready to quit college at any time too.”

Rather, it was already the 26th of September, so summer break was over and classes started a long time ago, but in the end, I didn’t go at all. I didn’t intend to either. I was just relaxing at home with Hikari-san. No, Hikari-san was working hard while I was relaxing.

To begin with, I didn’t attend school for any purpose.

It was just a way to stave off boredom, a way to kill time.

Something to do, that’s all.

“Thank you.” Kunagisa smiled at my words. “But it’s fine. Going back to headquarters would just be a hassle and I can work here too. That’s why nothing will change from how it is now.”

“Hmm. I see.”

But it’s abrupt.

Too abrupt.

Even though it was an internal conflict, I didn’t think it would be of this magnitude. At most, I thought that the combination of the seven under the Kunagisa Syndicate would change, but this is too abrupt.

It’s as if it’s accelerating.

Everything seems to be accelerating.

Then that means it’s a sudden...

Coincidence.

The timing matched.

Aikawa-san’s disappearance, the conflict in the Kunagisa Syndicate, and Himena Maki’s death. That they all occurred at the same time stands out as a significant theory.

Regardless of the extent of its truthfulness.

"That's the first piece of news."

"Huh? Is there a second?"

"Yes. Well, the second one is more important. It's about my body."

".....Body?"

"Ah, before that, Ii-chan."

Kunagisa turned around while staying seated and showed me her back.

"Do my hair."

".....Okay."

It's been a long time since we've had this exchange. I didn't have a comb, so I used my fingers to comb through Kungisa's hair.

Blue hair.

The proof of abnormality.

Recessive genes, huh.

"Didn't I tell you before?"

Kunagisa began to speak in that position.

While combing her hair,

"Huh?"

I asked.

"What did you say before?"

"I had to receive a thorough examination."

"....."

Silence.

I didn't want her to notice it.

I didn't want to let her notice the shock that had instantly spread to every corner of my body, so I continued to comb Kunagisa's hair at the same unchanging pace. "Hmm. Did you say that?" I responded casually, as if it were nothing at all.

It's something that I left behind.

Something I didn't want to touch.

"Just two or three more years....."

I didn't want to hear it.

I didn't want to talk about it.

No matter what, I want to keep it vague.

I want to keep the possibility, the choice, alive.

That's what I thought.

But Kunagisa said it as if it was nothing.

Furthermore, it was an unexpected word.

“No, apparently that’s not the case.”

“.....Not the case? Don’t tell me it’s an even shorter period, or something like that.”

“Apparently I’m growing.”

Despite my misgivings, Kunagisa said in a matter of fact tone.

“My body is starting to function normally.”

“.....”

“They took it as an abnormality in the last exam, but apparently it was not an abnormality, it’s just that I’m returning to normal.”

“.....Umm.”

I was confused.

I thought about the meaning of those words.

Calm down.

Be careful to not make any convenient misunderstanding.

Understand it carefully.

Be sure to not make any errors. It’s something important.

Growth.

Up until now, Kunagisa’s bodily functions had stopped for a long period of time, but were now returning to a normal state.... is that what this means?

Then.

“So... is it fine now?”

“Yes.”

Kunagisa nodded.

“So... now there’s no need to be worried?”

“Yes.”

Kunagisa nodded.

“So... you won’t die again?”

“Yes.”

I embraced her.

From behind, I embraced Kunagisa Tomo.

“.....Congratulations.”

“It hurts.”

“I’m happy.”

“It hurts.”

“.....I’m really happy.”

“I’m saying it hurts! I’m serious!”

Kunagisa raged.

That’s quite rare.

I hurriedly untied my arms.

Instantly, I came to and thought back to what I just did and what I just said. A feeling of shame washed over me, making me want to disappear.

Kunagisa turned around.

Ah, this is bad……

Was I able to maintain a blank face?

My emotions were in turmoil.

Kunagisa was looking at me with her big blue eyes.

Blank pupils.

Eyes that were peeking inside of me.

Within those pupils, I was reflected.

Hey, hey……..

What is that face?

"Ii-chan."

"……."

"Ii-chan, Ii-chan."

"…..Wh-what is it?"

"Ii-chan, I love you."

This time, Kunagisa hugged me.

I was relieved.

That's right, this is how it should be.

I can't embrace from my side.

Ah, it feels good.

I could almost forget all the problems I had.

It makes me want to abandon everything.

Seriously.

I just want to disappear like this.

"…..But you know."

Gently, Kunagisa untied her arms from my neck.

"Ii-chan, you really haven't changed."

"……."

Those were the same words that she used last time.

My lack of change.

As usual.

For the Nonsense User.

"Ii-chan really doesn't change at all. And you're still worried about it."

"…….About what?"

"About six years ago."

Six years ago.

I looked away, awkwardly.

"There's no way I could forget, right?"

"Is that so?"

"I mean, you... because of me..."

"We've already talked about it so many times that I don't want to repeat it anymore," Kunagisa stood up. With me sitting, the position of her head was higher than mine. "Boku-sama-chan doesn't resent Ii-chan at all, you know?"

"....."

"In the first place, there's not a single thing that happened to me because of Ii-chan. **Ii-chan didn't break me at all.** You already know that, don't you? Since the day we first met, Boku-sama-chan has always been like this, right? I was born like this. I was born abnormal. Just like Professor Kyouichirou said."

"That's....."

That way of putting it. I didn't like it.

Admitting the words of that professor.

"Even so, I understand that Ii-chan holds feelings of guilt towards Boku-sama-chan, or rather, the feeling of wanting to be forgiven. I understand that you feel that way. I really understand that. I think you did enough to deserve that. I think you did that much for me. Probably. But even then, there's no forgiving or not forgiving. Because in the first place, Boku-sama-chan didn't mind it at all."

".....You say that, but."

In the first place.

What Kunagisa thinks isn't the problem.

It's what I did.

What I ended up doing.

That's the problem.

I've sinned.

So I have to repent.

I shouldn't be forgiven.

It's not like I'm asking for forgiveness.

I don't want to be forgiven.

Being forgiven after having committed a sin...

Isn't that just the worst?

“Right. Basically, it’s a matter of pride for Ii-chan,” Kunagisa said. “Now, the problem has changed to one that Ii-chan must solve by himself, without Boku-sama-chan.”

“My..... problem?”

“At the very least, the damage that you inflicted on me, and the damage that you think you inflicted on me has all been healed, right? I mean, I could go on and on. I don’t know how many times I have to repeat myself, but none of that was Ii-chan’s fault.”

“But.....”

“No buts. You just did your best and it ended up like that. If I may put it this way though, it’s just that Ii-chan is morbidly afraid of anyone other than himself being hurt. No matter who gets hurt you will always blame yourself for it.”

Wounds.

Flaws.

Defects.

“But you shouldn’t look down on me. The wounds I received six years ago from Ii-chan are nothing for Boku-sama-chan. Not to copy Neon-chan’s catchphrase, but it’s just a scratch.”

“.....”

“If anything, maybe I should’ve received a more serious wound, “Kunagisa said and sat back down on the sofa. “I think it’s a bit different from Ii-chan, who just pretends that he’s fine.”

“But I am.....”

“I don’t know about what kind of *maelstrom of trouble* Ii-chan is currently in right now, but, well, to be honest, thinking about last month’s case, it’s not like I can’t imagine it, but anyway, Ii-chan should look at himself first. Because even Boku-sama-chan can’t understand the pain of other people’s wounds.”

“.....”

If another person were to get hurt, I would bear the wounds myself.

But even if I do that.

No one will understand the pain of those wounds.

The scars would never go away.

“Someone who truly understands the pain of others, that would be the Akane-chan *of now*. Either that person, or the one who can be anyone’s alternative, Jun-chan. It may just be them.”

“Aikawa-san...”

What about Aikawa-san? That person often says something like "I don't understand other people's feelings" as a catchphrase, but I'm sure that Aikawa-san keeps in mind the feelings that she doesn't understand. That's why, paradoxically, she's able to understand the feelings of others.

She can imagine what other people are feeling.

She can empathize with the pain of others.

But.

That's why Aikawa-san will never understand. A hawk looking down at the earth from the sky cannot read the hearts of the bugs crawling on the ground. Even if she understands, it's a completely one-way understanding. That kind of understanding....

With or without it, it's the same thing.

"When you're in pain, it's fine to say it, you know? Ii-chan. Boku-sama-chan will spoil Ii-chan with all my might."

Kunagisa fiddled with her hair.

Then she smiled at me.

"If you ever decide that it's fine to get me involved, just let me know at any time. I'll come save you right away."

"....."

"You can do my hair later. Before that, Ii-chan, can you make me something? Boku-sama-chan is hungry."

".....Understood."

"There should be a lot of ingredients that Akane-san brought with her in the fridge."

"Okay."

I got up and left the room.

But two steps down the corridor, I thought back and turned around. It seems that Kunagisa's mind had already moved on to something else as she was watching TV on the big screen when I returned.

"Hmm?" She tilted her head.

"Is there something wrong, Ii-chan?"

"Umm, er, Tomo."

"What is it?"

"I lov-"

"Eh?"

"Ah, no."

I shook my head.

"What does ICPO stand for?"

“International Criminal Police Organisation.”
“Thank you.”

2

I thought that Hikari-san might come up along with the awakened Houko-chan after I had finished making a meal, eating it, washing the dishes, and killing some time in Kunagisa's room afterwards. However, there seemed to be no sign of that and I decided that it would be a bad idea to keep them waiting in the parking lot. I parted with Kunagisa and took the elevator straight down to the underground parking lot. In the hall...

I encountered the fox-masked man.

"……!? Wha……"

"Yo, my enemy."

The fox-masked man casually took one look at me and immediately turned his attention back to the manga he was holding. As if he didn't care that I had taken a defensive stance in an instant, he turned to the next page of the manga.

It was sudden.

Once again it was sudden, but there was no error.

There's no way it's a different person.

That kind of error is impossible.

No one else has this kind of atmosphere.

A kimono that looked like burial clothes.

A slim body that gave a refreshing image.

And a fox mask.

"…….Guuuuh……."

My breathing was disrupted.

Disgusting sweat trickled down my cheeks.

Even though nothing was done to me.

Even though nothing was done to me.

Just being there, right in front of me, just by existing, just by feeling that he's here, itwas suffocating. It was hard to be alive. This overwhelming feeling of being overwhelmed. This transcendental feeling of transcendence.

Yes, this certainly.

Resembles Aikawa Jun.

That humanity's strongest, the color red.

But why here?

In the basement of Kunagisa's apartment building.

What was the guard doing?
Hikari-san... Houko-chan... were they okay?
Is he alone? Did he come alone?
What about Kino-san and the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*?
Are you saying they're hidden somewhere?
Am I.
Am I alive?
Various questions passed through my head.
But really, this wasn't the time to answer them.
Because right now, I was facing the worst.
Because right now, I was confronting the man who should be dead.
"....."
"....."
No.....
Is it not a confrontation?
The fox-masked man wasn't looking at me.
This whole time he was just looking down at his manga.
It was as if we were old acquaintances who just happened to meet at the library. It was like he wasn't even aware of me. It was as if the contents of his manga took precedence over me.
But there was no way this could be a coincidence.
This kind of coincidence doesn't exist.
This was doubtlessly arranged.
What a guy.....
On top of that, he decided to ambush me in the basement of Kunagisa's apartment building of all places.
Kunagisa's.
Kunagisa Tomo's.
No... calm down.
Don't just let yourself be overwhelmed.
The only thing Kino-san knew about Kunagisa is that she calls me *Ii-chan*, but that means it's a fact that they already knew about her, and the level of security around Kunagisa was finally lowered today. In other words, they probably thought that it was inevitable that I would come visit her today. That was the same reason why I encountered that nobody, that woman whose name I don't even know in Kunagisa's room. That's why it was perfectly normal for the fox man to ambush me here.
But.....

Logically, in my head, I understood that, but.....

My body.

My body refused to understand.

It refused logic.

"Kukuku."

Having finished reading his manga, the fox-masked man finally turned his body to face me. Since the fox-masked man was way taller than me, I immediately felt like I was being looked down upon.

"It looks like you took care of Raichi."

".....I didn't particularly do anything," I answered carefully. "I really can't imagine Kino-san being in the same league as Izumu-kun or Rizumu-chan, but since you said that line, that means he **really** was one of *Thirteen Stairs*... he's beyond me."

"'Beyond me.' Hmm," the fox-masked man repeated my words clearly with a bored tone. "From the looks of it, it seems you've almost finished investigating me, my enemy."

".....Well, who knows."

"'Well, who knows.' Hmm. That's not a very pleasant answer. You'll lose friends if you give people that kind of answer. Well, it's fine. I don't really care. But I've just finished my investigation of you, my enemy."

".....Thanks for that."

"So that's why Kigamine was interested in you... no, I don't know **how far** Kigamine went. That's now an endless mystery. You really are a lot like me. It was like looking at my own history."

"That wasn't so much the case for me, though."

"Don't be so stubborn, my enemy. The various instruments that coloured your life were all nostalgic for me. Before I was expelled from karma, they were all the guys I played along with. The Kunagisa Syndicate, the ER3 System. And you... you also met with Zerozaki Hitoshiki in May, right? You were involved with the worst of the *Killing Names*, the Zerozaki clan. I sure was taken aback."

".....Those were just coincidences, though."

"I wonder just how many have died because of those coincidences."

"....."

"Well, no matter how many died, it's all the same. Oh right, if I could add one more thing, I heard that you were also present at the scene of the collapse of Sumiyuri Academy. In other words, you were involved with the Four Gods and One Mirror, huh? In just 19 years, you were involved with **almost the**

entire world, especially in the last six months. What's up with that? Kukuku. It's just what I would expect of my enemy."

"If you were able to find out that much, then you're quite something yourself, Saitou Takashi-san."

"Oops. It's not yet the time to call me by that name. Not yet, it's not yet the time to name myself."

"....."

Even now... not yet, huh.

Then, well, I half expected it, but he has no intention of **settling things** here and now.

I relaxed just a little.

I would rather avoid doing something **here**.

But after all, if you think about it, that should be no surprise. Certainly, this fox-masked man isn't the type to advance things that easily.

He's not the type to advance the Story that easily.

The key word is acceleration.

And the end of the world.

Above all, the end of the story.

In the end, even if he calls me his *enemy* and sees me as his enemy, I'm not the focal point. He is only staring at the world, at the Story, and at the fate that exists behind me.

So... what should I do, then?

How should I get through this?

How should I...

Survive.

"The *Thirteen Stairs*..."

The first one to break the silence was the fox-masked man.

".....Finally, all members are present."

"All members... if I remember correctly, I heard last time that not even half of them were here. That's what you told me, right?"

"Yeah. With Rizumu and Izumu missing, I had to look for quite a few people. I had a list of candidates to begin with, so it wasn't such a hassle, but... Hmm. Honestly, though, there were some disappointments. What with the incident with Hagihara Shiogi and also with the Niounomiya siblings, they are far from the best members. Hmm. At first I imagined a more intellectual group, but it ended up being quite far from my expectations."

".....My condolences."

“Well, whether they’re the best members or not, it’s all the same either way. After all, it’s just a matter of numbers.”

The same thing, huh.

It’s that line again.

That line that sees everything as being of equal value.

Even the exact opposite concepts can be interchanged, everything is identical.

He can only see everything as the same thing.

Everything is everything’s alternative.

Parts that can be changed.

You can see the nerve of the person who immediately filled the hole left by Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan with new members.

The Niounomiya siblings.

Setting Izumu-kun aside.

Rizumu-chan seemed to have admired him.

“In short, I came here today to declare war.”

The man with the fox man said.

I couldn’t tell because of the mask, but there was a laugh.

“Raichi was supposed to be the one who should have done it, but you didn’t read it, right? The letter that Raichi gave you.”

“It’s because you put people in between us.”

“Don’t say that, my enemy. My body has already been expelled from causality. For everything I do, I need someone else to be my arms and legs.”

“.....Even then, I never even got to touch that letter... He misunderstood up until the very end, he thought that the person who had come to visit me that day was actually me.”

“Asano Miiko, right?”

“.....Yes.”

Miiko-san’s name too... he knows it.

I felt like clicking my tongue. Well, if he investigated me, I guess it’s natural for him to look into my neighbors.....

.....No, wait.

That’s not it.

This is different.

How does he know that the person who visited me was Miiko-san.....

“But, my enemy. Don’t think that Raichi is an idiot. He may be an idiot, but not to that extent. He doesn’t have a simpleness like Rizumu, a *weakness* like Rizumu.”

"But... then."

"**I** deceived Raichi. I'm the one who got him confused. I was with Raichi until the hospital reception. There I saw a nurse with an awfully short skirt and your neighbour talking, so thinking that this was also fate, I told Raichi **something that wasn't true**."

".....Why would you?"

"Don't glare at me like that. I apologized to Raichi after."

"Not that, why..."

Why did he make him mistake Miiko-san for me? Why was that necessary? It was as if everything that happened in that hospital was just a pre-established harmony for the fox-masked man.

Pre-established harmony.

A farce of pre-established harmony.

"Are you planning something?"

"Whether I'm planning something or not, it's all the same."

"Kukuku," the fox-masked man laughed.

The same thing, huh.

Well, that might be the case for me, but for the fox-masked man, that's not necessarily the case.

".....Then... Mr. Fox. Apart from that, there is something else that bothers me. Something which Kino-san said that I can't understand."

"What?"

"'You will absolutely not die.' Kino-san said something like this. It seemed like you were the one to have said that to him, but what exactly is the meaning of those words?"

".....You've arrived at a good point, my enemy."

The fox-masked man might have smiled.

Maybe he wasn't smiling.

I couldn't see his expression.

But I could feel his gaze.

He was probably gazing at me.

He was glaring at me like he was having fun.

You will not die.

Is that about *the research into not dying*?

No, it didn't have the same nuance.....

The whole time it bothered me.

"But..."

The fox-masked man, however, refused to answer.

“It’s not yet the time to tell you about that, my enemy.”

Then the fox-masked man took out a letter from the sleeve of his kimono.

It was the same white envelope as on that day.

“.....”

“Take it, my enemy,” the fox-masked man said. “This time, nobody is between us, it’s coming directly from me. For this me who was expelled from causality to do something so direct is quite an exception. Please don’t make me do the impossible too much.”

“.....What is that.....”

“An invitation to a party.”

The fox-masked man seemed very delighted.

Because of his mask, I couldn’t read his expression.

Even though I could read it, I could tell that he was delighted.

What’s fun?

What’s so fun?

Just watching made me feel irritated.

My heart was on edge.

“The date, the time and place, and the other attendants are all noted there. You can bring as many friends as you’d like. I’ve made sure that there **will be more food than you can eat**.”

“.....”

“What is it? Are you scared?”

“.....I’m scared. Really scared.”

I...

As if snatching it away, I took the envelope from him.

“That’s why using that fear I’m gonna take you and your stupid ideas, your bullshit philosophy....”

“And I will kill, dismember, gather it, line it all up and expose it.”

The fox-masked man took off his mask.

And laughed evilly.

“.....You’re the worst.”

“As are you.”

Hmm, the fox-masked man snorted.

His face looked so much like Aikawa-san’s that it was almost revolting. At the very least, if he called himself her *father*, you couldn’t see otherwise.

“I’ll give you a hint then, since the current state of affairs is out of balance, I’ll give you a little handicap. Just to make the party more lively.”

“Hint.....”

“Go to Fukuoka. There’s a man there you know very well.”

The fox-masked man put his mask back on.

Once more, his expression couldn’t be read.

It couldn’t be understood.

“What that man will tell you depends on you, it depends on your skill. At the very least, there are not many days left.”

“Not many days.....?”

“That means we’re running out of time. The month of September is not a very long one.”

Clonk!

The fox-masked man’s steps echoed.

As he passed by my side.

It seems like he was planning to leave.

I had no intention of seeing him off. I didn’t even want to turn back, but...

“Right, right.”

The fox-masked man said as he turned the corner of the pillar.

“That island...”

With an unmotivated voice, as if saying it as an add on.

“That fortune-teller...”

As casually as telling me what he ate for dinner yesterday.

“...I killed her.”

“.....!”

“As an exile from causality, I did not have a direct hand in the matter, but I was the one who gave the order. Even though I want to see the world’s end, there’s no meaning in it if I don’t see it myself. **If I’m told about parts that I haven’t read yet, it makes me lose interest**.”

“.....YOU!”

I turned back and ran.

I followed after the fox-masked man’s back and turned the corner, but he wasn’t there. He couldn’t have gone far, so I rushed in the direction I thought he went. If I remember correctly, the fox-masked man’s car was a white two-seater Porsche. It’s a car that stands out on the street, but in that parking lot it’s just like all the others. So not the color, the sound. The sound of the engine. Don’t miss the sound of the engine....

And.

Headlights shined in front of me.

High beam.

Blinded by that light, I reflexively dodged.

A white porsche.

The fox-masked man was seated in the driver's seat.

I dodged to the left, so he was far away now.

Not only was he far away, but on top of that, the person sitting in the passenger seat blocked my view of the fox-masked man.

It was a strange figure.

It passed me for just a moment.

It was an instant, so I couldn't quite grasp it's appearance.

But.

A small, childlike body.

A yukata as if they were going to a summer festival.

Wearing a baseball cap facing the wrong way, and...

A fox mask.

However, it wasn't something that the fox-masked man would wear. It looked like it was something targeted at young children, something that you might see being sold at a summer festival.

That fox mask.

Glanced at me.

Our gazes crossed for a moment.

I felt like they crossed.

But that's all it was.

It was just that.

The Porsche didn't slow down, but rather accelerated and then left the underground parking lot. I thought about sounding the alarm and contacting security, but I didn't think that would do any good. They had managed to get past security and enter. There's no way they didn't think of a way to escape.

Shit. They escaped.

What a parting remark.

He killed Maki-san? Who did? Someone in the *Thirteen Stairs*? How? Maki-san's *prediction*, her fortune telling, even though he may have learned about it by researching about me.....

That person, the fox-masked man.

He knew about the ER3 System, the Kunagisa Syndicate, the Sumiyuri Academy... even after having named a bunch of different points, having even

known about Maki-san's name, in the end, he never mentioned a thing about Aikawa-san.

Aikawa Jun.

The currently missing contractor.

Isn't she you daughter.....?

Aren't you worried about your daughter?

It's not the time to be concerned about me, is it?

If you're a father.

If you have a parent's mannerisms.

"....."

But.....

The *yukata* in that passenger seat... another fox.

Well, considering that the fox-masked man rode directly into enemy lines, it wouldn't be surprising if he came with a bodyguard. I had considered the possibility, but is that all it was? What's with this feeling of discomfort and irritation?

I can't explain it, but I felt like I met them somewhere before. Is it my imagination.....? In that moment, I couldn't even tell their face, their body, or if they were a man or a woman. I couldn't even tell whether or not it was just my imagination.

Are they also a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*?

.....Shit.

This is hard to deal with.

Not to borrow the words of Iria-san, but...

Aimlessly, as if teasing.

When I think about its acceleration, I still can't reach a conclusion.

It seems quick and lazy.

No amount of haste will advance the story.

Every time something is consumed, the foreshadowing gets more complex.

Nothing, no matter what you do, will get through.

Aimlessly, it accelerates.

Like the relation between time and gravity.

Theory of relativity.

So, in the end, the Story is relative.

Thirteen Stairs, huh?

He said Fukuoka.....

But I've never been to Kyushu.....

“.....Um.”

Suddenly, a voice came from behind me. Surprised, I turned around to see Hikari-san dressed in a maid’s uniform staring at me, slumped on the ground of the parking lot, with worried eyes.

“I came because I heard a loud noise. Did something happen?”

“No... it’s nothing,” I stood up with Hikari-san’s help. “I’ve always had a habit of making weird noises when I’m alone.”

“Oh... that’s a bad habit.”

Exactly, I said as I shrugged.

She can’t find out. I shouldn’t make her needlessly worried. I didn’t meet anyone in this parking lot. I just need to make it seem like nothing happened.

“What about Houko-chan?”

“She’s completely asleep. From what I can tell, she must not have been getting much sleep lately.....”

“? I wonder why. I think growing up is supposed to make you sleepy, but in middle school, I was only awake one out of every three days.”

“That was surely an illness, master.”

“.....Should we go home?”

“Yes.”

Hikari-san smiled.

“Let me drive again.”

“.....Hikari-san... you don’t have a license, do you?”

“Ara. Don’t take me for an idiot. Even if I grew up in a garden and am ignorant about the world, I’ve at least done that. When I turned 18, I paid for it properly.”

“.....”

The maid who grew up in a garden and was ignorant about the world was boasting, but for the little ones in front of the TV, let me tell you, a license isn’t something that you buy with money.

I didn’t have the energy to respond with that, so of course I didn’t have the energy to drive the car either. I sat down in the passenger’s seat, despite some hesitation. I glanced at the back seat and saw that Houko-chan was sleeping soundly.

Hikari-san sat in the driver’s seat and started the engine.

“Ah, that’s right, master.”

“.....What is it?”

“I have a question, if you don’t mind. It may be none of my business, it may be a small detail, but I have a tendency of being bothered by small details. A thought occurred to me while I was waiting.”

“Ask whatever.”

I waited for Hikari-san’s question, while thinking that we certainly had a conversation like this back on the island too.

“Umm... I believe you heard about Aikawa-san’s disappearance while you were in the hospital. That’s what you said, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“I thought you heard about it when Kunagisa-san came to visit you in the hospital, but today was the first time you saw her in a month, right?”

“Yes. I refrained from contacting Kunagisa during the conflict in the Kunagisa Syndicate.”

“Then master, who exactly did you hear from about Aikawa-san’s disappearance?”

“.....”

It was an astute point.

I hesitated for a bit with my answer.

But in the end, I answered honestly.

“From the Great Thief who came to visit me.....”

ACT 4 – THE THIRTEEN STAIRS

0

The rabbit did its best for the lion.

1

The next day.

I headed towards Fukuoka on the bullet train.

I took the Vespa to Kyoto Station, left it at a nearby parking lot, and bought a bullet train ticket from an automatic ticket machine. Naturally, it was unreserved seating. Considering that I was travelling to an unknown place, I decided to refrain from wasting money. It was just before noon on a weekday, so there'd be passengers who'd leave the train at the next station, Shin-Osaka. So even in the worst case, I'd only have to endure until the next station before I could get a seat.

It takes about three hours to Hakata Station.

I plan to come back on the same day and I haven't made any reservations at an inn, so I can't take it too easy. For my business... rather, for my *objective*, it should take me at most a few hours. Honestly, I wanted to head to Kyushu as soon as I got back from Kunagisa's apartment, but it took me longer than expected to shake off Hikari-san and Houko-chan. I'm someone who has spent the last nineteen years thinking about nothing but running away from others, about outwitting other people, so evading pursuits or tails was my specialty. Thanks to that I was able to escape from a demonic killer's blade in May. That's why I thought I could easily lose those two if I wanted to, but I was too soft.

Houko-chan was merciless.

And Hikari-san was a pro.

It was frightening.

I don't want to remember.

Even the thought of giving up and letting them accompany me had passed through my head.

However, because the fox-masked man had already made contact with me, I wouldn't be able to carry anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks with me. Especially when it comes to Houko-chan. And aside from the fox-masked man, the place I was heading to... no, the place doesn't matter.

The *man* that I was about to meet...

He's too dangerous.

I can't let anyone else meet him.

It's not like I'm going to meet him because I want to, either. It's just something that can't be helped, that's what I told myself.

Moving forward is hell, retreating is hell too.

A tiger at the front gate and a wolf at the back gate.

Will it be a demon or a snake?

Well, something like that.

".....This is my first time coming to Kyushu, though."

Getting off at the Hakata Station, I couldn't help but look around. Although the words "country bumpkin" weren't really fitting in this case, it still felt like a novelty. I don't often go outside of the Kinki region. At most, when I went to the Aichi Prefecture in July.

Though I've been around Kyoto quite a lot this year.

From Wet Crow's Feather Island to Sumiyuri Academy.

".....Sumiyuri Academy, huh....."

Hanging high school.

Origami Noa, Hagihara Shiogi, Saijou Tamamo, Yukariki ichihime.

June.

And.

September.

Meaning, in other words, the numbers six and nine.....

Well, I don't like to travel in the first place.

I end up thinking of unnecessary stuff.

I end up indulging in unnecessary memories.

Especially when inside a moving train, it's like a place to think about unnecessary stuff and remember unnecessary memories. In a way, I was envious of Houko-chan who always falls asleep when she's in a vehicle because I'm the type that can't fall asleep when around other people.

Well, with the situation being the way it was this time, not having the time to devote to such extra thoughts was a blessing in disguise.

I took the bus from Hakata Station.

I brought a compass just in case, but it's dangerous to walk around in an unknown place and I was already short on time to begin with, so I decided to rely on the transportation services.

An unknown territory.....

To begin with, when you're in a place for the first time, even if you hear the address, it doesn't really make sense to you until you actually go there

and I wasn't able to do any preliminary research at all because of Hikari-san and Houko-chan.

The only thing I could rely on was a single note.

Written on it was just the address.

"……Good grief."

I'm not very good at physical activity.

That's why I'm bad at traveling.

I'd like to just sit in an armchair and knit carefreely but that's just not going to happen.

Fukuoka.

I didn't get what he was talking about at first. He said that it was *a certain man*, but I didn't have any idea who it was. The only thing that comes to mind at the mention of "Kyushu" are the Ichigai and the Sanzaka who serve under the Kunagisa Syndicate, but I don't have any connection to them. Even if I went back in memory to six years ago, it's still the same.

But Saitou Takashi.

He said it was a hint.

And the *Thirteen Stairs*.

The end of the world.

Researching a way to not die.

When all of that data is gathered, there was indeed one and only one person that comes to mind.

A guess.

Or I guess it'd be two rather than one.

That too is nonsense, however.

"……"

It was around the beginning of September when the Great Thief, Ishimaru Kouta, came to visit my hospital room.

She was dressed in almost the same way as that figure I saw in July.

Long hair braided on both sides. A hunting cap and a denim coat. Denim pants and lace-up boots.

However, she didn't wear glasses.

It seems that her eyes aren't actually that bad.

Since the turmoil in the *Mad Demon*, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou's, research facility, I had met her several times through Aikawa-san, but honestly, we weren't close enough that she'd come and visit me in the hospital. Of course, Kouta-san didn't come because she was worried about my health.

“Aren’t you searching for Aikawa Jun?”

It was the usual sing-song voice.

It’s still clear in my memory.

“She is currently missing. Were you aware, dear friend?”

“Do you have some business with Aikawa-san, Kouta-san……? But…” I answered nervously.” If Kouta-san can’t find something then there’s no way I can, right? There’s no way I’d know something that Kouta-san doesn’t, right?”

“…….You are as consummate as ever, dear friend.”

Kouta-san seemed to be having fun. At the very least she didn’t seem to be tense or serious. From that point of view, this person had an element similar to Aikawa Jun.

But, well, there were some differences.

Aikawa-san has a bad personality,

but Ishimaru Kouta is ill-natured.

Ultimately, the difference is quite large.

Depending on how you interact with them, it’ll leave an impression later on.

“Missing… since when?”

“Weren’t you aware, dear friend? In the back world it’s a pretty famous story. Aikawa Jun and Izumu the *Man Eater*, of the *Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic*, killed each other at Kiyomizu Temple. It ended with them *striking each other at the same time*. Didn’t you know?”

“Striking each other……?”

I raised my body at those words.

I was a little confused.

Part of me also felt that I was careless.

In the first place, it was me who set up the battle between Izumu-kun and Aikawa-san. I’m not shameless enough to say that I wasn’t responsible.

“I thought that you’d know about this. What do you think, dear friend? If you do know something, would you tell me?”

“Unfortunately, as you’ve just heard, this is the first time I’ve heard that fact. Umm, then… Aikawa-san, Izumu-ku-that *Niounomiya* person might have killed Aikawa-san?”

That’s not the case is what I thought.

It’s because I thought that there was no way Aikawa-san would lose that I told Izumu-kun about Aikawa-san. I guess I underestimated him.

That’s right, Izumu-kun isn’t an amateur either.

Abandoning all possible *weaknesses* and focusing them on a single point. That existence that specialized only in *strength*... should I have thought more deeply about the possibility of him approaching the *strongest*?

No, it's not that.

In the first place, my responsibility wasn't just setting the stage for those two. I dragged Izumu-kun out of the secluded life that he intended to enter into and on top of that, I put him up against Aikawa-san.

If Aikawa-san died because of that...

I wouldn't be able to face anyone.

That's also when it comes to Hime-chan.

I was suddenly nervous.

I clenched my fists tightly.

But.

Kouta-san said, "ridiculous," and curved her lips.

"There's no way Aikawa Jun would die."

"....."

"That's nothing more than a baseless rumor. That that person would die without my permission... it's impossible. Because that person is the only one in the world that I recognize as my rival."

".....Those words sound a lot like trust."

"I really hate that person. To avoid any misunderstandings, let me just say this....." Kouta-san hid her eyes under her hunting cap. "It's just that she's the only person who can balance me out. Even though I hate her, I would be troubled if she disappeared. Otherwise, it would not be consummate."

".....Is that so?"

"Well, if you don't know, then there's not much to say, dear friend. I wasn't really expecting much to begin with, and besides, I wasn't looking for her seriously either so don't misunderstand. Haphazardly, incidentally, without any reason, I search. That's all. Well then, this wasn't much of a greeting, but I will excuse-"

"Ah, wait....."

"Did you remember something?"

She had a face full of expectations.

I felt a bit guilty.

I mean, I didn't think she was such an honest person.

She's ill-natured, but she's not a bad person.

"I, uh... have something I need to talk with Aikawa-san about..... something I failed to tell her, so if Kouta-san manages to find Aikawa-san, if you are successful in your search for her, could you tell her to contact me?"

Since then.

More than twenty days have passed, but I haven't heard from Kouta-san, let alone from Aikawa-san. I don't know if she's given up or simply hasn't found her yet, but anyway, if it's impossible for Kouta-san, then probably no one can find her. As Kunagisa herself said, it'd be impossible even for her, and even for *Chii-kun*. And of course, for me too.

I had a strange conviction.

That the one who will find Aikawa Jun will be Kouta-san.

".....That being said."

It's unreasonable to rely on someone who's not here.

To be honest, it's not like I want to dump everything concerning Saitou Takashi, that fox-masked man, on that contractor, but I'm still hoping that Humanity's Strongest will come and crush Humanity's Worst before things get worse.

However.

I can't just wait for that to happen.

In the first place, I was the one who chose to keep that fox-masked man a secret from Aikawa-san even though I had an opportunity to tell her. It was a decision I now regret, but at the time, I was afraid of getting involved with him.

I'm still afraid.

I don't want to get any more scared.

That's why I came all the way to Fukuoka.

This stay-at-home Nonsense User.

Without even being asked by anyone, voluntarily.

"I wonder if this is growth.....?"

Or perhaps degeneracy.

Well, either one is fine.

Come to think of it, Hime-chan's *master*, Shisei Yuma's birthplace was Fukuoka. It's a place that I could have come to with Hime-chan, but this isn't the time to think of such things. There's no way it is.

I got off the bus near my destination and walked from there. As someone who lives in Kyoto, I use the names of streets as landmarks, but since they weren't laid out in grid here it didn't work as well as it did in Kyoto.

This is bad. If I end up wasting too much time here, I won't be able to get back to my apartment today. If things go poorly, Hikari-san and Houko-chan might catch up with me. I don't think that they'd chase after me all the way to Kyushu at any cost, but since it's those two, I was still a bit concerned.

".....I'm beat....."

While saying that.

I got a bit lost, but somehow, I managed to reach my destination before the sun went down. I was able to reach the address written on the note.

It was an old apartment.

No, more than just old, it was dirty.

Not damaged, but dirty.

Rather than the floor creaking, the floor seemed to sink.

The narrow hallways were overflowing with old magazines and garbage bags and on closer inspection, there were more than a few flies and other insects.

How should I put it, it's like the pollution was vivid.

It wasn't decaying, it was rotting.

It smelled worse than it looked and the atmosphere was unapproachable.

I don't live in a proper apartment myself, so I can't really talk, but this is just too awful. It wasn't funny. No one has probably cleaned this place for quite some time. It was at this moment that I was really glad I didn't bring Hikari-san with me.

Umm.

Do people actually live in a place like this.....?

This was more of a ruin than a residence.

But no matter how many times I checked the address, no matter how many times I repeated it, the result was the same. Well, that's right, hesitating after coming this far won't get me anywhere.

It can't be helped.

Let's resolve ourselves.

Since my objective was on the second floor, I climbed up the metal staircase installed outside the building. Some of the stairs were rusty and warped and they creaked when I stepped on them, making me fearful. Do the residents of this apartment live in constant fear of this sword of Damocles? Though, to use that metaphor, this apartment is far from prosperous.....

While avoiding poly buckets and a washing machine that may or may not work, I reached the room I aimed for. Room number five... well, since that's room number four, it's probably just the next one... so this room?

The door hinges of room four were broken and it was clearly unoccupied, but the door of room five looked sturdy in it's own way. The front of the room too... well, compared to the others, it was somewhat cleaner.

At the very least, it seemed like someone was living here.

There was no nameplate.

.....No intercom.

I once again resolved myself.

Thinking about it, it finally occurred to me that since I knew this room's phone number, I could have made an appointment beforehand, but that would be impossible now and pointless in the first place.

If he's not here, then it's fine.

To the point it may be better if he's not here.

Please don't be here.

Here.

If I were to meet *him* here, it would be something like proof. The Story would accelerate too much.

It'd practically be an affirmation of the Story.

It's too good to be true to be a coincidence.

Or maybe that's what the fox-masked man is after.

Giving a hint to his *enemy*.

Giving a handicap to his *enemy*.

I don't think he's that good of a person.

The reason for the worst.

The cause of the worst.

"....."

But.

Still, I have to meet *him*. Even if I'm dancing in the palm of the fox-masked man's hand.

Whether it's Back Nozzle.

Whether it's Jail Alternative.

I don't care.

I knocked.

"....What are you doing acting so suspicious in front of somebody's room?"

But I missed.

The door suddenly opened.

Since I intended to knock with force, I fell forward a little and nearly hit the person who opened the door.

Nearly.

It was a close call.

A head-on collision would have been fatal.

"Huh? You..."

".....Hey."

He was wearing thin leather pants while his upper body was naked.

A thin, white body where the bones could be seen.

But it didn't seem elegant at all.

Bare feet.

His small stature made him look like a middle schooler.

His arms were unnaturally long for such a small height.

His hair had changed since the last time I saw him. Before he had long hair that reached his hips, but now, like Houko-chan, he now had a bob cut that reached the shoulders. He used his glasses as a headband to keep his bangs raised.

"Hmmm...."

He.

After catching sight of me, he moved slowly, right, left, right, as if he were crossing a crosswalk, he checked his surroundings.

Then, seeming to be calm, he smiled wickedly.

"If you're here to kill me, don't you think you're missing about six billion people, Onii-san?"

".....I guess you're right."

"Come in. I'll at least make you some tea."

Saying that.

Niounomiya Izumu invited me in.

2

Not just the hallway, but the inside of the room was surprisingly tidy. It seems that Izumu-kun is quite a neat freak, though not as much as Hikari-san. The trash was gathered up in one spot and the old magazines were neatly wrapped together with string.

Six tatami, plus a simple kitchen, a shower, and a toilet. Hmm. It seems that at least in this room, the conditions are better than in the apartment where I live.

A CD radio-cassette player, a 14-inch TV, a pipe bed (with a storage box underneath), a small desk with stationery and a lamp on it. And yet, there were still books spread around haphazardly on the tatami mats. It was kind of like the room of a college student one year after living on his own. At the very least, it was neither the room of a professional killer nor of a great detective.

.....

No, well.

A former professional killer and a former great detective I should say.

The Niounomiya siblings.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

One as a pair, a pair as one.

One is a pair, a pair is one.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

Siblings.

That however, isn't really an accurate description.

He and *she* share the same body.

A double personality, that's what it's called.

The *little sister*, Niounomiya Rizumu.

The *big brother*, Niounomiya Izumu.

They spend their time in a closed time.

They spend their time in a closed space.

There is no name for their body.

There are two names for their mind.

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

However, their role is singular.

A professional killer.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

Niounomiya Rizumu is in charge of investigating.

Niounomiya Izumu carries out the massacre.
Niounomiya Rizumu is in charge of the *weakness*,
Niounomiya Izumu carries out the *strength*.
Two extremes.
This is the insanity of polarizing the *weakness* and the *strength* that should originally have been two sides of the same coin into a ridiculously simple dualism and even personalizing them.
Two personalities.
A big brother and a little sister.
Siblings.
You could call them a monster.
This *professional killer*, the Niounomiya siblings.
Had their head cut off and their heart gouged out.
And yet, even after receiving that much damage, they were still alive.
Leaving a body.
Leaving a personality.
It's not a metaphor, it's a fact.
Even though they were beheaded.
Even though their heart was ripped out.
They still survived in the end
That's not all. It would be fine if that's all it was, but that's not all, Niounomiya Izumu **clashed with** Humanity's Strongest Contractor, the *Death Colored Crimson*, Aikawa Jun.
And is still living.
Still living.
Just living.
Even if you kill him, he doesn't die.
Kill, kill, kill, kill, but he doesn't die.
Even if he is killed, he doesn't die.
Even if he is killed over and over and over again, he doesn't die.
It's just like immortality.
It's a big departure from the fox-masked man's and Assistant Professor Kigamine's *research into not dying*, it's more of a monster-like immortality, but it's still immortality.
The fact that something like that was right in front of me.
That something like that exists.
That alone made me shiver.

“Oh, since I ran out of tea leaves, I prepared coffee. Onii-san, you seem to be the kind of person that likes it black, but do you put in cream at least?”

“No, completely black.”

“Hyaa. So cooool.”

Saying that, Izumu-kun came around to my front with two cups in his hand. He handed me the cup in his left hand with a “here” and then sat on the duvet of the pipe bed. He took a pillow and threw it near me. It seemed to mean that I should use it as a seating cushion.

“.....Izumu-kun. Listen, I’m having trouble figuring out where I should look, so can you put on a shirt or something?”

This situation, in which a girl of that age is half naked in front of you, might be quite a happy one depending on the circumstances, but considering future developments, it just made things harder to deal with. Besides, it’s only the body that’s *a girl of that age* and the personality manifested within is an eighteen year old man, even more so it’s an eighteen year old professional killer.

“You pervert. Where are you looking?”

“It’s hard not to look in this situation.”

“I did all of the laundry just now. It hasn’t dried yet.”

“Try doing your laundry with a bit more planning next time.”

“Before, Rizumu used to take care of all that...” Izumu scratched his head in an extremely irritated way. “Then, Onii-san, let me borrow your shirt.”

“Then I’d be the half naked one this time.”

“Onii-san is a man both physically and mentally, so it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s true, but.....”

I wasn’t too comfortable with that idea.

But since there didn’t seem to be any other way, I took off my shirt and gave it to Izumu-kun. “Uwaa. It’s all lukewarm and gross,” he complained while putting it on.

“Since Onii-san lives in Kyoto, you probably don’t know, but Kyushu is pretty hot, you know? At least let me be naked in my room.”

“In your case, it looks like you’d even go out in that state so it’s scary. You opened your door without any concern earlier.”

“But I was wearing pants, right? Leave me alone, I can’t sleep unless I’m naked.”

“You were sleeping? During the day?”

“I’d prefer it if you stayed out of other people’s lifestyles.”

“I guess. But, well, I didn’t really come here to talk about that in the first place.”

“Hmm… but you did great in finding this place. Did you ask Mr. Fox?”

“Not exactly. I’ve known about this address for a long time because Rizumu-chan had given me her business card.”

It’s from when we first met.

When Kasugai-san picked her up she took out a business card from her wallet in order to confirm her identity and found her address and phone number written on it along with her title of *Great Detective*. More precisely, the card was lost, but Kasugai-san has a good memory so she memorized it.

That was the address written on the note.

The address. The postal code and the address were completely unknown to me, but yesterday, when the fox-masked man told me “Fukuoka,“when I thought about all of the information, that address immediately came to mind.

I went back to my apartment to check and bingo.

At the very least, I didn’t have any other lead.

However, it’s not like I wasn’t worried. Given the **flow of the Story**, it was almost certain that I’d meet Izumu-kun here, but before, I had been told once by the fox-masked man last month that “that address is a fake” and “even if you go there you won’t find anything.”

Well, that part can be explained.

At that point, Izumu had decided to retire.

He decided to enter into seclusion.

The fox-masked man didn’t want to get in the way of that.

He didn’t want me to be a hindrance.

So he made sure that I wouldn’t visit that address.

Izumu-kun’s… no.

In this case is it rather Rizumu-chan’s?

Whichever it is, the fox-masked man.

Accepted the Niounomiya siblings’ will.

Accepted their will and chose to be silent.

However that was **at that point.**

At the current point.

He made things progress and let me meet Izumu-kun.

Without caring about the Niounomiya siblings’ will.

He tried to make the Story progress to his convenience.

He made the Story accelerate.

If you asked him about it, he'd probably tell you that it's "all the same either way," or something like that.

You can't even call it a whim.

This is also Back Nozzle, huh.

"But, that being said, it's a wonder... for Izumu-kun, who should have gone missing after that battle with Aikawa-san, to be living normally at the address written on the business card. I wouldn't have considered it."

"Hmm. So you can't accept that I just went to Fukuoka? Then let me ask you something, Onii-san, did you receive that business card directly from Rizumu?"

"Ah, no....."

That reminds me.

Kasugai-san took the liberty of pulling it out while Rizumu-chan was unconscious.

"We don't publicize this address, you know. Basically Rizumu was simply holding on to that business card. There's no way that she would do even a single thing that could disadvantage me."

".....Right."

Niounomiya Rizumu, the puppet.

It sounds fine when you say that it's a double personality.

But in reality, she's just Izumu-kun's proxy.

"How do you think Aikawa Jun was able to call me out in the first place?"

"That's... using a secret route only known to contractors....."

I thought she just relied on *Chii-kun*.

Well, it makes sense, I guess.

"But if you truly intended to hide, if you say that you've already retired, then I think you should have moved out of this place because Rizumu-chan is no longer here."

Right.

Niounomiya Rizumu is no more.

Niounomiya Rizumu's personality disappeared.

Niounomiya Rizumu is dead.

Now.

There's just one personality within the body of the girl in front of me.

Just Niounomiya Izumu.

"That's what I thought too, but..."

Izumu-kun looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"**I had a feeling you'd come visit me one day.**"

“.....”

“It’s a joke, don’t be so serious.”

“I’m not.”

Thinking about it calmly, those kinds of cover up operations and the manipulation of information were all undertaken by Rizumu-chan, the personality of *weakness*. *Hiding oneself* is something far removed from Izumu-kun’s field of expertise.

That’s all there is to it.

I don’t have the time for frivolous conversation.

Don’t get serious.

Don’t get irritated.

I just need to face him honestly.

“Aikawa-san...”

I asked.

“What happened to Aikawa-san? From the rest of the world’s point of view, it seems that you and Aikawa-san defeated each other at the same time.”

“Defeated each other? Ha. Defeated each other, huh.”

Izumu-kun laughed with self-deprecation.

“Well, as you can see... most of my hair was lost. I thought it was a good match, but, well, there wasn’t a clear conclusion, so it was a draw, I guess.....”

“That’s pretty vague coming from you.”

“It’s a bit vague, well, because it was a half-assed match.”

“Half-assed?”

“I carelessly, unintentionally, inadvertently let my mouth go loose.”

“Izumu-kun is pretty talkative.” I nodded. “So what did you say?”

“About Mr. Fox.”

Izumu-kun said.

“As expected, I should say... she understood in an instant, that woman. **That it was her father**.....”

“.....And then?”

“Who knows. That’s why it was half-assed. I was desperately trying not to die, so before I knew it the main stage of Kiyomizu temple was completely destroyed. Well, most of it was probably from my *Eating One*, but I was covered in pieces of hinoki cypress and on the ground, looking up at the sky, and Aikawa Jun had disappeared.”

“Disappeared.....”

“She was nowhere. Not a trace, not even a corpse.”

Then at the very least, that means Aikawa-san wasn't killed by Izumu-kun.

That was good news.

I must tell it to Kouta-san.

Of course, the question remains as to why Aikawa-san couldn't be found after that, but still, we've made a lot of progress on this case. That alone made it worth coming all the way to Kyushu.

And……

Without even me needing to tell her,

Aikawa-san learned about the existence of the fox-masked man.

She learned about her father's existence.

……

Then is that related to why she erased her presence?

To think that it's not would be absurd.

"Mm? What's up?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm happy **that you were able to lose without getting injured**, Izumu-kun."

"I didn't lose. I said it was a tie," Izumu-kun complained. "But after that, to think that she went missing. I wonder where she is and what she's doing, that strongest one."

"Do you intend to get revenge?"

"No, it's fine now. I know when to quit."

"I know that very well."

"It bothers me what she's doing, though. Because I might be a bit responsible."

"Mr. Fox… she learned about the existence of her father, right? Aikawa-san. If that's the case, then it should be easy to guess"

"Father, huh… gyahaha, I don't really get that kind of thing."

"Speaking of which, Izumu-kun, what about your parents?"

"I don't have any."

Izumu-kun laughed cynically.

"All I had was just a *little sister*. And even that is now gone. The price of fighting the strongest, I guess"

"Dual personalities, huh……"

"She was my precious *little sister*… what about you? Do you understand that strongest's feelings? Do you have parents or something like that?"

"I do. I also had a little sister."

"Had? Past tense, huh. Same as me."

“Well yeah. Also the expression “I had” doesn’t really fit in this case. Unlike you two, Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan, we shared very little time together.”

“Huh?”

“When I was so young that I couldn’t even remember words, she was kidnapped. I grew up without knowing that fact.”

“Kidnapped.....” Izumu-kun was slightly surprised. “Now that I think about it, Mr. Fox’s big sister was also kidnapped. So? What happened? Did you find her after that?”

“Rather than finding her, I was living right next to her, unexpectedly. It wasn’t until I turned ten that I realized that she was my sister.”

“That’s quite complicated.”

“It is complicated. Though it seems everyone knew about it except me.”

Just the same as back then, I’ve been living my life outside of the loop.

I’ve been conceited from then on.

“She died in a plane crash shortly thereafter, so the time we spent together as brother and sister was a very, very short amount of time.”

“Hmm. What a cool past,” Izumu-kun interjected, sounding as if he had lost interest. “By the way, did you ever find the culprit who kidnapped your sister?”

“The Kunagisa Syndicate.”

I answered as if it was nothing.

“Hmm.” Izumu-kun nodded.

He probably thought it was a common story.

Well, it isn’t an uncommon one.

It’s not a weird or bizarre tale.

It’s normal.

To the extent that it’s not enough to be called a story.

It’s not something cool.

It’s a normal story.

A story from long ago.

I don’t really think much about it now.

Six years ago.

I only thought about it somewhat.

“.....So? You’re not going to tell me that you came here just because you’re worried about what happened to Aikawa Jun, right? It would take me three whole days to travel from Kyoto to Fukuoka, even if I were to run.”

“No, I used the tools of civilization.....”

What about the sea in between?

Do you swim?

"Yeah. Well, I wanted to ask about Aikawa-san, but I have more important things to discuss. There's something I want you to tell me, Izumu-kun."

"Something you want me to tell you? What is it?"

"Everything."

I took out the envelope.

The envelope handed directly to me by the fox-masked man.

The seal was already broken.

I already finished checking it's contents.

Instead of picking up the envelope placed on the tatami mat, with a very irritated expression on his face Izumu-kun murmured, "I see....."

"So that's the situation."

"....."

"You became Mr. Fox's enemy."

".....Well, yes."

"You did, huh. I'm not sure what you're thinking, Mr. Fox. Onii-san and Zerozaki Hitoshiki are completely different, aren't they?"

Izumu-kun looked really irritated.

.....Hmm?

Just now, it sounded as if he knew about Zerozaki. No, I'm pretty sure we've had this conversation before.

Ah, wrong, wrong.

It was Niounomiya Izumu who had informed the fox-masked man about Zerozaki's existence in the first place. If that's the case, then it's only natural that he knows about him.....

However, something is.....

Completely different?

Completely unalike?

".....So, what's the situation?"

"It's not really a situation. Now that every member of the *Thirteen Stairs* is present, he wants to hold a party....."

"Oh. He gathered them, the *Thirteen Stairs*. I thought it was something forever impossible. Mr. Fox found his *enemy*, so he scrambled to gather them in a hurry. Hmm. Without me or Rizumu, I wonder what kind of members he got. I'm somewhat curious."

"....."

"So that's the *everything* you want me to tell you, but, Onii-san."

In an instant.
Niounomiya Izumu's arms stretched.
No, they didn't stretch, but it felt like that.
His right hand that should have been holding his coffee cup.
Was gripping my face.
With his fingers completely spread and wrapping around.
The thumb on my right cheek.
The little finger on my left cheek.
The three remaining on my forehead.
Firmly gripping.
Fixed.
"...Did it ever occur to you that if you came to me asking something like that, I'd kill you?"
"....."
"Despite being removed, I was also one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, you know?"
".....I know."
"Then you have the nerve to come to me in Kyushu, the place that was once called the end of purgatory, to meet. The reason, let's hear it. If you have such a delusion of importance.
".....Now that Rizumu-chan is gone, I thought you'd have no reason to follow Mr. Fox."
"That's lacking... even though I retired, I'm still a *professional killer*. The difficulty of staying alive when in front of me, I should've taught that to your body, or have you already forgotten?"
"....."
"Did you think it'd be fine if you died?"
"I don't want to die."
"Then why?"
"Because if I were to be killed here, that would mean a denial of the Story. The one who told me to come here was that fox-masked man himself. So getting me killed here would be a denial of his philosophy, it would deny Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative. If it's like that, then I could deny what he calls the Story. I could give him a blow. Either way, it's not bad."
".....That's a good answer."
Saying that.
Izumu-kun didn't relax the power in his right hand.
Rather, he tightened his grip a bit.
Huh.....

Seriously, what the hell?

Did I read it wrong……?

“Th-there’s one more reason.”

“What. Try to say it.”

“Because I love Izumu-kun.”

“……”

Squash!

My skull was crushed.

That was not the case, what was crushed was the coffee cup that was in his left hand before I knew it.

Then.

Izumu-kun released me from his right hand.

“……A place to stay. Did you find one?”

“No. I intend to go home today.”

“Then stay here tonight… it’ll be a really long story so get ready. Don’t think you’ll be able to go to the bathroom midway.”

“……Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I simply…”

Izumu-kun took the envelope on top of the tatami.

“Wanted to scare you.”

“……”

“If after you’ve heard everything, you can still have an unconcerned look on your face without even closing your eyes as you’re about to get killed, I’ll kiss you on the cheek, Onii-san.”

3

Kajou Akira.
Ichirizuka Konomi.
Emoto Sonoki.
Utage Kudan.
Furuyari Zukin.
Tokinomiya Jikoku.
Migishita Rurero.
Yamiguchi Nureginu.
Miotsukushi Misora.
Miotsukushi Takami.
Noise.
Kino Raichi.

"Hmm...?"
Izumu-kun.
After looking at the document from the envelope, he tilted his head.
".....There's only twelve of them, aren't there?"
"Yeah."
"Mr. Fox said that he gathered every member, right?"
"Yeah."
"What does it mean?"
"Well, I've thought about it, but probably the *Thirteen Stairs* is not necessarily an organization composed of thirteen members. That guy, he said that 'everyone is here,' but he never once said anything like 'the thirteen of us are here.'"
"I mean, sure I haven't heard how many people he intended to gather, I assumed it'd naturally be thirteen, but if the *Thirteen Stairs* are only twelve people, it doesn't really sit well."
"Is that so? If it's that fox-masked man, he'd probably say something like 'whether there are thirteen or twelve people, it's all the same.'"
"That's true."
"Or maybe he intended to gather thirteen, but then decided that twelve was enough. The number also becomes thirteen with Mr. Fox included."
"I see. That seems possible."
Seemingly convinced, Izumu-kun turned his attention back to the document.

With a hmmm, he nodded a few times.

As I expected, he was somewhat interested.

It was an organization he was a part of originally.

Not just him alone, but also with his sister.

"The time... the night of September 30th... the place... what? The ruins of Sumiyuri Academy?"

"Yes."

I nodded.

"It's a place with many connections, you see."

".....Do you intend to go?"

"For now," I nodded. "If I don't, it seems like this won't end anytime soon."

"End, huh....."

"But if I'm going to this place, I'll need to know what I'm walking into. I'm not suicidal."

"Hmm... but," Izumu looked back several times at the document as if something bothered him. Since the furigana was written clearly, I don't think it's a problem of him not being able to read the kanji. "...Anyway, I've met a few of these guys."

"A few, is it?"

"When Rizumu and I were there, there were only six of us. Four excluding me and Rizumu. Amongst them there's one that I haven't met, but I know the other three."

"Three....."

So he only knows three.

That's a slightly disappointing fact.

But even then, I can't rely on Kunagisa for this. I still don't have the ability to think that *it's fine to involve her*.

But.....

"No, don't worry. There's only three that I've met, but the other nine are all famous people. As expected of Mr. Fox, he didn't neglect to keep an eye on *the whole world*. Though, there's a few people that I'm unable to stomach mixed in there."

"People you're unable to stomach.....?"

"Yeah. A few names that this *Man Eater* can't stomach, but, well, it's fine. So, Onii-san, who do you want to hear about first?"

"Even if you ask that, since I don't know any of them at all, for now, I would be grateful if you could tell me about them in order."

"In order, huh. Then first..."

Izumu-kun spread the letter out on the tatami mat so that the both of us could see it.

"...This guy. Kajou Akira."

"Yes."

"Even if you say that you don't know any of them, you must know him at least, right? He's a colleague of Mr. Fox that went with him to America."

The fox-masked man's colleague.

Aikawa Junya.

Kajou Akira.

"He should be dead, though."

Ten years ago.

Just like the other two and their daughter.

"He's alive, that's what Mr. Fox said. If he died, then Mr. Fox and even the strongest would be too. Even then, I've never met him. He's one of the four. The first step of *Thirteen Stairs*."

"....."

"Well, as far as this guy is concerned, Onii-san, I don't think you need to be careful of him. It seems this guy has yet to return from America."

".....Is that so?"

"He's what you'd call a special ambassador," Izumu-kun said. "He's also called the *Second*. Mr. Fox is the *First* and the other guy was the *Third*. It's probably a nickname from long ago."

"*Second*, huh....."

Kajou Akira.

When I did my research on Saitou Takashi, I looked into the man to see if I could trace it back to him, but I didn't find anything.

He was completely unknown.

"He's the only guy in the *Thirteen Stairs* who's on equal footing with Mr. Fox. Well, to be honest, I doubt it. Even whether he exists or not. The only one who said he was alive was Mr. Fox. From that standpoint, he's different from Mr. Fox or the strongest."

"I see....."

"Well, in that sense, even if he's worthy of fear, he's not worth being careful of. He's like a ghost. No matter how scary he is, he can't harm you. So next is the second one. Ichirizuka Konomi."

"Judging by the name, I assume it's a girl."

“Right. The second step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, the *Space Creator*. She has no combat abilities, but she’s a rare type of ESP user that creates *places*. I didn’t like this one and I heard she didn’t like me either.”

“Creates *places*.....”

“There’s this thing called an advantageous position, right? Fighting somewhere you’re familiar with is an advantage for anyone, but the opposite is also true. In other words, it’s an ability useful for when you want to divide and conquer the enemy.”

“Have you met her?”

“I and Rizumu were the third and fourth step. Though that was when we retired. When we entered the *Thirteen Stairs*, we were the seventh and eighth step. It was a system where you progress by reducing your number. The alternation of people was quite intense.”

“Hmm... but the fact that this Ichirizuka Konomi is the second step means.....”

“Yeah. She’s one of the three I’ve met. She looks like a very serious and sophisticated woman who reads poetry at the library, but her personality is pretty nasty. On top of that, she worships Mr. Fox from the bottom of her heart.”

“Worships?”

“What you’d call head over heels.”

“Hmm.....”

If that’s the case, then it’s a bother that she’s a girl.

The fox-masked man... he looks like he’s someone who’s popular.

“The third step, Emoto Sonoki. The person who was promoted after I left. When I was there, they were the fifth step.”

“That means he’s an old acquaintance.”

“Judging by the name, this person is a guy,” I said to Izumu-kun. Izumu-kun said “yeah” and nodded.

“He’s a doctor.”

“Doctor?”

“The medic within the *Thirteen Stairs*, I guess. He’s the same as Konomi, he doesn’t have any ability to hurt others. I mean, when I was there, it was enough with just me carrying out that role since I counted for twelve people, but, well, I was in his care quite a bit. Mr. Fox called him *Physician* or *Doctor*.”

“Doctor, huh.....”

"He wears a lab coat like it's loungewear, so he really gives off that doctor impression. And he's, well, I don't know... unlike Konomi, it's not like he's worshipping Mr. Fox."

"Is that so?"

"You can at least imagine that it's not a monolith, right? With the leader of the group, Mr. Fox, being like the incarnation of whim."

"That may be right, but....."

"The Doctor's a guy whose purpose is to heal the wounded. No, more than just a purpose, it's his life's work, I guess. He's a bit like me, actually, though our vectors are opposite."

"So if you're around Mr. Fox, you won't be troubled with injured people."

"That's how it is."

".....I'm beaten. It's only the third one and I'm already quite sick of it."

Also... Emoto, huh?

It's not like with Aikawa-san and Aikawa Junya, but since this surname's reading overlaps with another surname I know, it makes it hard to deal with. Well, I guess I can't really be bothered by such things. Surnames overlapping is probably not that rare.

"So, the fourth step... this Utage person? With that I can't really tell if they're a man or a woman, but it's the last of the three you've met, right?"

"That's right."

However, Izumu-kun seemed somewhat indecisive.

His expression was vague.

"But this Utage Kudan... I've known him for a long time and I've talked to him quite a few times, but he's a guy I just can't get a grip on. Just from what I know, he's been demoted twice by Mr. Fox. Despite that, it doesn't seem like he has any special power. I can't understand at all what he's thinking... he was called *Imaginary Weapon*." (TL : sounds the same as nuclear weapon)

"Nuclear... eh?"

"*Imaginary Weapon*. It's a play on words by Mr. Fox. It means that it's a guy that you can't tell whether he's here or not. It seems that Mr. Fox wanted to gather people *like that*."

"People like that?"

"*Weird people*. For Mr. Fox, what kind of ability the person has doesn't really matter. Whether it is a *professional killer* or a *doctor*, it was all the same. *Weird people*. The kind of weird people that seem able to **take part in the Story**. In other words, Utage was probably originally a candidate to be a *future enemy*. In that sense, he might be an existence of the same type as you, that

Utage Kudan. His appearance too, he doesn't have any special characteristics."

"……."

Somehow, it feels like a mixture of both good and bad…….

The same type as me, huh…….

Obviously, he's probably not exactly the same as me.

There's no one who's the same as me.

Even if there were, there's only one at most.

"Then from the fifth step onwards, as I said earlier, I've never met them. From this point on, they're the eight that Mr. Fox gathered after I left, with the image of the battle with you completely in mind. It's because they recognize you as the *enemy*, and because the *enemy* exists, that they are members of this group. Except for one, all of them have names I recognize."

"Huh……."

"I don't know all of the details from here on out, so I'm doing it in one go. The fifth step, Furuyari Zukin, *Swordsmith*. The sixth step, Tokinomiya Jikoku, *Thought Manipulator*. The seventh step, Migishita Rurero, *Puppeteer*."

Swordsmith, thought manipulator, puppeteer.

Hmm. It's starting to look a little more like an organization.

"Setting swordsmith and puppeteer aside, you don't hear the words thought manipulator that often."

"Well, it's close to hypnosis. The *Niounomiya* who created me and Rizumu, the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe's opposite… of the opposite… of the opposite… the Tokinomiya. Gyahaha, when I was around, I never would've been able to be allies with those guys."

"Why?"

"Because that's what I was trained to do. Every time I saw someone from the Tokinomiya, I mowed them down without exception. Gyahaha, that one would join the moment I leave, Mr. Fox really is calculating."

"Was that one of the people you didn't like?"

"Kinda. No, the people I hate even more are the three after that."

Izumu-kun smiled broadly.

But his eyes weren't smiling.

What is it… is he mad?

About the selection of the people who filled in the gap he left.

…Though that's probably too selfish.

“Those three are probably for me and Rizumu… no, well, I guess only for me. Those three were probably prepared as my substitute. I really was sold cheaply, to think that I could be replaced with just those three…”

“……”

“Yamiguchi Nureginu, *Assassin*. Then Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, *Professional killers*.”

“Professional killers? Huh……”

“These guys, the Miotsukushi are an offshoot of the Niounomiya Performing Arts Group. They were originally more like a gathering than an organization, but the Miotsukushi is too much. Couldn’t he have at least prepared a Sawarabi… wait, ah, Zerozaki Hitoshiki crushed them, didn’t he? I forgot. Even then, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami… when these two are together they finally become a full fledged combination, but putting them on par with Niounomiya siblings is ridiculous. Even if that were the case, they’re only the ninth and tenth step. Aaaaah. I’m kinda hurt.”

“Do you want me to comfort you?”

“With your life?”

“No, with my burning heart.”

“I will humbly refuse.”

“I’m deeply disappointed.”

What’s with this conversation?

I gave myself the comeback.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’ll give you an explanation. The two of them are twins. With their unique trait being that they’re twins who kill their target as a combination, they are the natural, or rather, the default type of professional killers for the Niounomiya Performing Arts Group.”

“…….I’ve heard various people talk about it, but does everyone in the Niounomiya form a team with their brothers and sisters to conduct their job?”

“Yes.”

He nodded.

They really are a weird bunch……

“I was recognized as an exception to that rule, though.”

“A double personality isn’t exactly siblings, right?”

“That’s how it is.”

A byproduct was it?

He said some clever things.

"Well, as for the Miotsukushi pair, that's fine. So the name before that... that Yamiguchi Nureginu guy. Izumu-kun, what kind of guy is he? You said he's an *Assassin*, right?

"Hmm. Well, *Assassin* is a pretty tricky way to put it. You, how much knowledge do you have about the *Killing Names*? I don't think I need to explain any more about the Niounomiya, but..."

"Honestly, that world is distant."

Not to say that it's a fairy tale.

Still, it's on the level of a dream.

"Hmm. For me it was everyday life, though. Though, thanks to Rizumu, it may have been better for me than it is for the others. The *Yamiguchi* are the second in rank after the *Niounomiya*. By the way, the Zerozaki are third. However, the most fierce and loathsome ones are the *Zerozaki*, while the *Yamiguchi* are the second most loathsome. One more thing, in regards to who's the most abhorred, it'd be faster to count from the bottom for the Niounomiya."

"? How does that happen? Umm... these are the *professional killers*, the *assassins*, and the *demonic killers*, right? Setting the *demonic killers* aside, I feel like there's not that much of a difference between *professional killers* and *assassins*, or is that amateurish thinking?"

"No, you've hit a point. At least, one the face of it. However, Onii-san, to begin with, the nicknames like *professional killers* were given to the *Killing Names* pretty haphazardly."

".....Haphazardly?"

"We just needed a sign to distinguish between them. If we go back to your origin, you didn't name yourself, you had other people who named you."

The people who named me, huh.

I wonder who they are.

"But it being haphazardly means....."

"From my subjective point of view, the only names that I think are fitting are the *Niounomiya*'s *professional killer* and the Zerozaki's *demonic killer* and, well, just barely, but the Ishinagi's g*rim reaper*. In particular, the *Yamiguchi*'s *assassin* definitely doesn't fit."

"Yamiguchi... and Ishinagi.

Hmm.....

Even though I understood it, I didn't feel good about my acquaintances sharing the same name with those kinds of people. This time even the kanji

were the same. I can't really tell them that they have the same name as those from the *Killing Names*.

"What's your reason for saying they're different?"

"What makes the *Zerozaki* so bad is that they're willing to resort to anything for their own. They have an abnormal sense of comradeship. Did you know that?"

"Hmm....."

"If you don't know, then just say so."

"No, it's not that I don't....."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

.....He didn't seem like the type.

"The *Yamiguchi* have something that's about half the same. They're willing to resort to anything for the master that they choose. An abnormal level of loyalty. Business-like murders based on a master-servant contract. That's their symbol."

"....."

"With no calculations, no plans, no limits, loyalty. They're just killers, what they do is the same. They just carry out the murders that they're ordered to do, so calling them *assassins* is fine, but if you ask me, they're more like soldiers. *Slaughtering soldiers*. Or perhaps like ninjas."

"Ninjas, huh....."

I see.

Thinking about it like that, it's easy to understand.

"Hmm. Even then, a *Niounomiya* being replaced by a *Yamiguchi* by Mr. Fox is pretty insulting. Even the gentle me is a liiiiiiiiiitle pissed."

"....."

"It's irritating. When Rizumu was here, she was the one in charge of all those annoying things. These slimy things make me agitated from deep inside my body."

"...Yamiguchi Nureginu... what's his defining characteristic?"

In an attempt to distract Izumu-kun's consciousness, I asked for information in the form of a question. It seems I was too thoughtless. It looks like that without Rizumu-chan, Izumu-kun is severely lacking in balance. Even when just holding a normal conversation, it looks like he could burst any moment. Talking about the *Thirteen Stairs* or the fox-masked man seems to be pretty close to the line.

"Nureginu the *Hidden Shadow*, Nureginu the *Concealed*. I've heard a lot about him from rumors, but no one has ever seen him. He never shows

himself in front of others. There aren't even any witnesses. In other words, every single person who has seen him was killed."

".....He's an amazing guy."

He doesn't look like someone who'd feel humiliated when compared to someone else. No, well, maybe if he had a normal person's sensibility, but for someone whose calling is *murder*, I didn't think it was something rude. At the very least, I didn't think that the man the fox-masked man chose to be Izumu-kun's successor was that unfitting.

However Izumu-kun snickered.

"There's no beauty in the Yamiguchi's killing."

"....."

"It's not limited to just the Mizutsukushis, it's the same thing for the whole *Yamiguchi* clan. I don't like their lack of aesthetics. They're just annoying sneaky guys who think that it's fine as long as they complete their job. They don't have any concept of duels or matches, it's really just a job. There is no plan, no strategy. In short, their methods are lame. They are stingy, annoying, and questionable. If you ask me, the Zerozaki clan is still better. Well, Onii-san, be somewhat careful of them. Those guys go for the kill easily."

".....I wonder how Mr. Fox got a guy like that under his control. Does it mean that the master Yamiguchi Nureginu pledged his allegiance to is Mr. Fox?"

"I don't know about that. That may be the case, but Mr. Fox isn't very good at gaining trust from men. He's got charisma, but it's mainly for women."

"Hmm. Even though no one's ever seen him, with a name like Nureginu it's surely not a man. So then... no, it's possible she pledged her allegiance to someone else and that person told her to obey Mr. Fox's orders."

"At any rate, it's Mr. Fox we're talking about here. Getting someone whose appearance has never been seen before to become his ally should be no problem for him."

".....I guess so."

A body expelled from causality.

That's why he needs limbs that can move in his stead, but I feel that using the *Thirteen Stairs* as mere limbs is a bit inadequate.

They're too unwieldy, too much to handle.

Of course, the fox-masked man wouldn't care about such things. I'm sure he'd just repeat that it's all the same.

But two *professional killers* and one *assassin*, huh.

Then it's reasonable to assume that the person who killed Maki-san is one of those three. From that perspective, it could be said that those three have some connection to me.

"Then."

Izumu-kun said with a pause.

"The next one, the eleventh step, I don't know him. Never heard of him either."

"Ah, the one you said you didn't know earlier."

Noise.

That's the only thing written.

It wasn't clear whether this was a surname, a first name, or a title.

Obviously, there wasn't any furigana given either.

Just three katakana.

"I haven't heard of him at all, not even from Mr. Fox. If he decided to add a no name like him, then there were surely other candidates. I really don't get Mr. Fox. That Utage guy is enough for no names, I don't think this is the time to gather even more *weird people*."

"You can't read his intentions, huh....."

"Noise, huh. I don't think it's just to make up the numbers, but is he Rizumu's replacement? An investigator, an information gatherer, it'd make sense now that there is none. You could say that Yamiguchi Nureginu could fulfil that role, but no matter how you look at it, that's not his speciality. Well, maybe he just doesn't need someone like that at this point..."

"Ah, that reminds me, I have a guess."

"A guess?"

"When I received this letter from Mr. Fox, he was with someone that looked suspicious. Someone who was wearing a fancy fox mask and a yukata. We only passed by each other for a moment, so I didn't really see much."

"A yukata and a fox mask...? What's with that clearly imitative guy?"

"They had the stature of a child."

"Hmm. I don't know anyone like that. Well, maybe it's him, but if there was someone like that, it wouldn't have been weird for me to have heard about it. Even if you were to exclude me, I can't really imagine that Rizumu didn't know."

"You're making quite a serious face while you're thinking."

"Huh? Of course, you idiot. In our world, unknown enemies are the scariest things. I don't mean to pretend that it's a war of information, but no one rushes at their enemy with complete ignorance. At the very least, I'm not

that kind of idiot. That's also something that Rizumu managed when she was here."

"No, not that," I said. "It's all other people's business now, but you're taking it so seriously."

"....."

Izumu-kun's eyes suddenly opened wide.

After a while, his face became flushed.

He stared at me with his dreadful eyes.

Damn, did I make him angry again?

However, Izumu-kun, without saying anything in particular, returned to his original expression and proceeded to say, "so, the last one," changing the subject in a somewhat forced manner.

I was relieved for the time being.

The last one.

"Kino Raichi, that guy-"

"Ah, it's fine for that person," I interrupted Izumu-kun. "As for Kino-san, I've already broken through."

".....Huh?"

"About ten days ago, he attacked me in the hospital. No, he just came to give me a letter, but he was fought off by someone who had just come to visit me. If we're talking about making up numbers, I think he would fit more."

".....Kino, you said."

Izumu-kun's eyes widened.

It wasn't the same as just before. This time, he turned pale.

Niounomiya Izumu turned pale.

"You fought with Kino?"

"Eh... ah, well, yes."

".....I intended to tell you this just now, that this Kino guy is the most dangerous amongst the twelve that I know. That you should never get involved with him. That even if you might meet Yamiguchi Nureginu, you should never meet him. I intended to say that to frighten you. Even then, without me saying it... you say that you've already broken through him?"

"Y-yes....."

That threatening attitude made me at a loss for words.

What... what is this exactly?

"He looked like a small fry and ran with his tail between his legs, but... what? Why are you looking at me like I've done something irreparable?"

"*Kino* is, you see..." Izumu-kun said while gritting his teeth. "Alongside the *Tokinomiya* that I talked about earlier, he's one of the *Cursing Names*. If you ask me, he's in a group much more dangerous than the *Tokinomiya*."

".....*Cursing Names*?"

"They're the guys I least want to deal with. They're even worse than the *Yamiguchi* or the *Zerozaki*. That's because, while we are a fighting group, they are a non-fighting group. If we are inhumans that are infatuated with *killing*, they're inhumans that are infatuated with *not killing*."

".....I don't see what the problem is."

Kino-san's weakness.

So it was something bound to his name?

But what's the problem with that?

"Don't you see, they reject all combat. In other words, they win without fighting. And *not killing* just means that they don't dirty their hands, in reality they kill much more than we ever could. We only kill our enemies, but they even kill their allies. So thinking about it simply, they kill twice as much. There's no way you can be fine after coming into contact with one of the *Cursing Names* and on top of that, you ended up running into a *Kino* of all things... I swear, no matter what, including two of the *Cursing Names* in the *Thirteen Stairs*. I doubt Mr. Fox's sanity. I can only say that he's crazy."

A name he doesn't like, huh.

However, if that's the case.

At that hospital, Kino-san.

At that time.

Even though I thought we repelled him.

Even though I thought he fled.

"I can even bet..."

Izumu-kun stared at me with a bitter smile.

"You, or that person who visited you in the hospital, one of the two, or maybe both had something done to them."

"Something."

"I mean cursed."

Izumu-kun said, sounding extremely gloomy.

"Looks like I'll have to postpone the kiss for later."

4

The next morning.

The next morning that started on Izumu-kun's bed.

I got a call on my cell phone from Houko-chan

"Onii-chan."

More than usual,

It was a voice with strong calmness.

"Miiko-san is....."

ACT 5 – THE WARMTH OF SKIN

NOISE
DISSONANCE

0

The act of quantifying people turns them into individuals.

1

"Currently she's in a state of reduced activity."

A dark suit and tie.

Raven black hair and a thick hat.

Crossing her long legs and thin arms.

Suzunashi Neon.

She was making a complicated expression on the side of the hospital bed.

As one would expect, she wasn't holding a cigarette.

She never took her eyes off of Miiko-san, who was lying completely unconscious in bed, for even a second. She didn't even try to look at me.

My chest seemed to tighten at that sight.

"……Excuse me."

I pulled up a pipe chair for myself and set it next to Suzunashi-san. Since I was hospitalized here until just a few days ago, and since I have a lot of hospital experience, I knew how to act.

Miiko-san.

Officially, she was in a state where only the staff could see her, but by asking Rabumi I somehow managed to get permission to enter. Only Miiko-san and Suzunashi-san were inside the hospital room.

After receiving the call from Houko-chan, I came back to Kyoto on the bullet train, but Miiko-san was already in the hospital and undergoing some sort of treatment.

I looked at Miiko-san on the bed.

Though it was painful to look at her.

I looked.

It was a beautiful sight.

She didn't have any visible wounds.

She didn't look wounded at all.

However.

She looked very pained.

Her sweat flowed in drops.

Her breathing was erratic.

She looked like she was having a nightmare.

“High fever, difficulty breathing, dizziness, nausea, anemia, low blood pressure, paralysis, confusion. They said she was already unconscious when they brought her to the hospital. That morning, in the apartment, those, uh, what’re those cute kids called again... I was just saying good morning to Houko-chan, Moeta-kun, and the muscular old man, when suddenly she collapsed.”

“Suddenly.....”

“In reality, they said she had been feeling unwell for some time. I heard it too. Asano is pretty stubborn and she hates hospitals.”

“It can’t be helped,” Suzunashi said, forcing a bitter smile.

“The cause is unknown. At first the doctors thought it was something like a severe cold, but that wasn’t the case. Her body’s metabolism... or was it the immune system, was severely compromised. The symptoms are much more serious than they appear on the surface.”

“.....”

“It’s as if she was cursed.”

Suzunashi-san said that.

I clenched my teeth.

It was too late.

No, it’s not, if it’s too late, then it’s been too late for a long time now. It’s not a matter of a day or two, the situation hadn’t changed at all since I was at the apartment this morning.

Kino Raichi.

I learned of his existence too late.

I can only say that I was careless.

I didn’t have any words.

I didn’t have any words for Suzunashi-san,

And obviously I didn’t have any words for Miiko-san either.

What a thing.....

In the end, I had gotten her involved.

“.....”

Last night.

Izumu’s explanation about Kino-san. No, about one of the non-combatants, the *Cursing Name* Kino, I thought back to that unpleasant explanation.

Kino.

The venomous bloodline.

The poisonous bloodline.

The bloodline of poison transfer.

The infected bloodline of the Kino Division.

"Those Kino guys have all sorts of poison hidden inside their bodies. They have every poison known to man and unknown to man in vast quantities."

".....Poison?"

"Of course, the users, the *cursers* themselves have already built up an immunity to it, so be it poison or bacteria, they're fine. The Kinos transfer that poison to their opponent."

"Transfer....."

"As easily as you can transfer a cold, they transfer poison. That being said, it's not like they have explosive and indiscriminate viruses like the Black Death or smallpox, they're worse. They choose, they choose, they choose. They reduce their target down to an individual, limit it to an extremely focused point. That's why it's a curse."

"But that's... even if you say poison."

"That's why what they have ranges from already known ones to unknown ones. From things like sleeping medicine, to mild poisons that cause temporary blindness, to fatal ones that make you unable to breathe the moment you're infected. All sorts."

"....."

The poisonous bloodline.

The poison user, Kino Raichi.

Malicious is the only way to describe it.

"They're probably characters that can't possibly appear in a mystery novel, since they're guys that can use undiscovered poisons all they want," Izumu-kun said self-deprecatingly. "There's many kinds of poison, from fast-acting ones to slow-acting ones, but no matter which it is, it's from ten days ago, right?"

"Yes....."

"Then shouldn't it take effect soon?"

And.

It was soon after.

An unknown cause.

A compromised immune system from an unknown cause.

I didn't even have to think about it.

There was no other way to think about it

Why.

Why did it come to this?

I felt bad.
I felt awfully bad.
I felt as bad as if I was made to drink boiling water.
I felt as bad as if I was made to drink poison.
Kino Raichi.
Why didn't I notice?
I was too careless.
Even though there was no way it'd be settled without any trouble.
Even though I understood that he wasn't ordinary.
"...I wonder."
Suzunashi-san said after a long silence.
"Do you think she'll recover?"
"She has to, right?"
The truth is I didn't know.
What kind of poison Kino-san transferred to Miiko-san, what effects it had. It's something that only Kino-san himself knows.
At that time.
When Miiko-san thought she had fought off Kino-san with her baton, he must have done something to her. The only time there was direct contact was when he passed the letter to her, so was it at that time?
Miiko-san.
Miiko-san, who he thought was me.
"Inoji, you..."
Suzunashi-san said while still not looking at me.
"Did you confess to Asano?"
".....Yes."
"Asano sought advice from me. That blockhead, that idiot who only thought about swords, she was quite seriously using her brain to think about it."
"I'm flattered. Though I was rejected in the end."
"Asano is, you know... she's always been like that."
Suzunashi-san said as if reminiscing.
"An ally of justice."
"....."
"I guess she was just a kid who wanted to be a hero. But you know, if there's no justice in this world, I think that allies of justice are awfully hollow."
"Justice is....."

In the end, justice is merely the name of the winner.

It's not an absolute value.

The allies of the weak aren't necessarily right.

"Well, that's probably just a part of karma. It's just that Asano is that kind of person. At the end of the day, she's just a good-natured person."

"....."

"But I'm surprised that this good-natured person didn't accept your confession. She's someone who can't say no when you ask her something, so I heard that her time at school was a disaster."

"I also heard about that."

"Because of that mess, she was abandoned by her family. That's why those people at the apartment, including you, are like family to Asano."

"....."

Family.

Miiko-san, me, Moeta-kun, Houko-chan, Nanananami, Koutoumaru-san, and Ukigumo-san and... Hime-chan. It's not like everyone really gets along well enough with each other for it to always be harmonious.

But maybe that's how a family is.

At the very least.

It was probably like that for Miiko-san.

"That's why she probably didn't reject you because she didn't like you. It's not like that. I don't know if Asano's poorly spoken words got through to you or not, but she was just thinking about you..."

"She's good-natured."

I said.

"She's a really good-natured person."

Even though she could've left someone like me aside.

Even though it would've been better to not care about me.

She faced Kino-san without even being asked to.

And after all that, it turned out like this.

As expected.

And yet, even in this situation.

I can't be thankful.

I'm angry.

Why didn't she run away?

Why didn't she just let me handle things?

I want to blame her for her weakness.

It's not strength, it's weakness.

It's not kindness, it's being soft.

.....But.

But that's.

That's not at all.

"Suzunashi-san, I'm sorry."

".....About what?"

"Even though I was told to not get Miiko-san involved, she's now stuck in this mess."

"....."

"I'm sure Suzunashi-san has already figured it out, but this is my fault. Even if I were to apologize, I wouldn't be able to apologize enough....."

"I'm sure that Asano protected you of her own will," Suzunashi-san interrupted. "You reap what you sow. This is what happens when you butt in without using your own discretion. If you've spent more than half a year with Inoji, you should be able to understand that much."

"That's not the right way of putting it, Suzunashi-san."

"Even then, the only thing I can say, Inoji....."

Suzunashi-san finally looked at me.

You could see the weariness in her expression, but.

She had the same eyes as usual.

As always, strong and filled with determination.

They were her eyes.

"The only thing I can say is that Asano doesn't regret it one bit. She doesn't think that she was wrong or that she made a mistake. Asano has probably repeated this kind of thing many times in her life. She thinks that if you were to get hurt, it would be better for her to get hurt instead."

"....."

"It's the same way of thinking as you."

"I..."

It's less painful if I'm the one who's hurt.

If it's my own pain, I can bear it.

Other people's wounds are painful.

Because it's a pain I don't understand, it's painful.

"How's it being on the receiving end? Instead of you, it was Asano who ended up getting hurt. It's something that gets to your chest quite a bit, isn't it? You feel more anger than gratitude towards Asano, don't you?"

".....Well, that's....."

After all.

There ended up being a lot of damage and it's still growing.

Even though it could have ended with just me.

Even though it could have been something simpler.

It's becoming more complicated.

More complex.

It's a mess.

"You ever hear of the Porcupine Dilemma?"

"Well, just about."

"But you know, it's a metaphor that only works when both have needles. If one of them is just a mouse, then no matter what, you won't be able to find a comfortable distance."

"....."

"And if both are mice, you never know when they might end up running into a cat. Ah, sorry. Even if it's me, this isn't a situation in which to lecture you."

"No....."

Even in this situation, she's tough.

She's got the same eyes as usual.

There might be some who think that's cold.

Even though her best friend collapsed, without panicking, without being perplexed, without crying or screaming, Suzunashi remained calm as usual. That may be considered to be cold by some.

But that's wrong.

I know how much Suzunashi-san thinks of Miiko-san. I know how much Suzunashi-san likes Miiko-san. I understand that this toughness is there to support Miiko-san.

She probably won't cry.

But.

No matter what happens, Suzunashi-san will never leave her bedside. Without caring about whether it's a weekday or a day off, whether it's day or night, she will stay beside Miiko-san. She will bear Miiko-san's wound.

"Inoji."

"Yes."

"I don't really know what it is, but you came here straight from Kyushu, didn't you? Leave this place to me and go back home."

"But....."

"Sorry."

Suzunashi-san said, hanging her head.

“Even though I know it’s not your fault, when I’m with you, I feel as if I’ll end up taking out my anger on you. Though I say some important sounding things, I’m not perfect either. Please forgive for thinking like this.

“Suzunashi-san.....”

The truth is, it doesn’t matter what’s said to me.

It’s my fault.

The wounds.

I should be the one bearing the responsibility for those wounds.

“I don’t want to take my anger out on you and by doing that make Asano angry. That woman is scary when she’s angry.

“Yes... I know that very well.”

“I bet,” Suzunashi-san responded.

I bowed my head deeply and left the hospital room.

2

I took the bullet train from Fukuoka to Kyoto Station and then I took the subway directly from Kyoto station to the hospital, so I had to go back to Kyoto Station to pick up my Vespa before returning to the apartment. I had to pay an extra charge due to my unplanned overnight stay in Kyushu.

I bought a ticket to Kyoto Station and went through the ticket gate to the platform. A few minutes later, the train arrived and I boarded it. It was somewhat crowded, but not to the extent that there weren't any empty seats. I sat in front of a middle school student who was listening to music with big headphones on.

And then.

And then.

"……"

What in the world.

Who should I apologize to in this case?

A condition prone to causing accidents.

Once again someone around me got involved.

Wounds.

I dealt the damage.

Without anyone having to tell me, I understood that I'm not the victim, I'm the perpetrator. I've known that for a long time.

No matter what she herself said,

I'm the one that broke Kunagisa Tomo.

Even if it was the result of an accidental plane crash,

I was the one that killed my little sister.

Even if it was the result of a failed experiment,

I was the one that burned her.

And that's not all.

I'm not just talking about the old days.

Even now, isn't it like that?

Nothing has changed.

In June, whose fault was it that my classmates were killed?

Whose fault was it that my classmates died?

Was it the demonic killer's fault?

It's not, right? It's my fault.

And Hime-chan.

Hime-chan and Kuchiha-chan and Assistant Professor Kigamine.

They're all dead.
Whose fault is that?
Was it the professional killer's fault?
It's not, right? It's my fault.
I know.
I understand.
I'm the perpetrator.
Damage.
Assault.
Damage.
Assault.
I'm not pitiable.
I'm not in a position to receive pity.
Miiko-san.
Asano Miiko-san.
Without her, I wouldn't be the person I am today.
She always supported me when I was about to collapse.
That's not kindness.
But it wasn't just being soft.
That's not strength.
But it wasn't just weakness.
She has always, without asking anything, silently watched over me.
Keeping a comfortable distance, she stayed beside me.
I felt more angry than grateful.
But more than that.
I wanted to apologize.
I wanted to apologize to Miiko-san.
But that's no good.
I can't do that.
It's not generally something that can be forgiven.
Really.
How many times do we intend to do the same thing over and over again?
Both this game of cat and mouse and match-pump are nauseating.
That confession.
Maybe I shouldn't have done it.
It's something I understood.
Around me, everyone goes crazy.
Around me, everything goes crazy.

Crazy, crazy, crazy, they just can't stay normal.
Everyone, everything, never goes as planned.
No matter whose intent it is, it all gets chopped into pieces.
There was no way feelings would reach.
There was no way words could be conveyed.
It's my fault.
Unpleasant regrets were stirring up my head.
They intermixed.
I couldn't control my thoughts.
Last month... no, before that, if I had just left the apartment, if I hadn't lived there in the first place, without getting involved with anyone, I can't help but think that none of this would have happened.
Jail Alternative.
Back Nozzle.
The fox-masked man would surely laugh at such regrets.
And yet.
No matter how selfish it is, I can't help but think that it would've been better if I hadn't met everyone at the apartment.
Relax.
Calm down.
Don't look back.
Miiko-san isn't dead yet.
Miiko-san is still hurting.
Because of me, no.
For my sake, she's still fighting.
Then I.

What this Nonsense User can do...

"**Even an exPErt in MArtial arts can't WIN against diSEAse, huh...**"

".....Wha!?"
When I raised my head from its reclining position.
Almost every passenger inside the train had disappeared.
The only ones left were me and...
The middle schooler sitting in front of me.
A school uniform, a short sleeved shirt.
White sneakers.

A school cap and glasses with rectangular lenses.

And big headphones.

The sound of a complex melody was leaking out.

"……."

Where did all the other passengers go? Just a few minutes ago, nearly all of the seats were filled. Did they all get off at the previous station? Everyone? All of those people?

"Stop lOOking around, no one's HEre. They were IN the way of me talKING with you, *Ii-chan*, so I HAd them disapPEAR. It's not LIke I kiLLed them."

The middle schooler in front of me spoke.

He was looking at me.

His words were a little broken.

They were strangely high-pitched.

"I'm NoiSe. It's an old WOrd from BriTAIN meanIng *interFerence*."

"Noise……."

"The eleVENth step of the *THIRteen StairS*."

The *Thirteen Stairs*!

Then he's not just a middle schooler!

"IT seems KiNO-san's trick finaLLY took eFFect, so Mr. Fox told me TO come checK on you. ObviouSLY, I didn't cOme to see how that WOman is, I came to SEE how you were, *Ii-cHan*."

"…….Hmm."

I.

After having raised my hips slightly, I sank back into the seat again.

Seeing that, the middle schooler, Noise-kun laughed merrily. No, just because he's wearing a middle school uniform doesn't necessarily mean he's a middle school student.

"I THought you'd be shocKed, but you're unexPEctedLy cOOl, *Ii-chaN*."

"Honestly, I am disappointed."

I said while staring at Noise-kun.

It wasn't on impulse.

"You and also Mr. Fox, Saitou Takashi. I overestimated you, or rather, I misjudged you. I didn't think you were the kind of people who'd be so aggressive about getting unrelated people involved."

In that underground parking lot.

The man with the fox mask said that he was the one that told Kino-san that Miiko-san was *Ii-chan*. In other words, it's not the result of a simple

accident or misunderstanding, the fox-masked man intentionally targeted not me, but Miiko-san.

"He's a PErson that wantS to see the eNd of the worLD, so of course he's an opporTUNist. For that perSON, everything concerNed and UNconcerneD, related and unRElated, is all equaL. That woman was just unLUCKy enough to have CAUght his eyE by acciDent."

She caught his eye, huh.

I guess that's also true.

He said that he happened to see Miiko-san in the reception area while she was chatting with Rabumi-san. It's likely that he was planning to attack me right up until that moment.

On the fox-masked man's whim.

Accidentally.

The target switched to Miiko-san.

".....Even then, what meaning is there in involving Miiko-san?"

"RighT, rigHt, I have to say that or I'll get scolDED by Mr. FoX. I need to FULfil my role as the eXplaIner."

Noise-kun lifted one finger and pointed at me.

The train passed by one station.

No one came on board.

The next stop is Kyoto Station.

I need to get off to retrieve the Vespa.

.....However, this member of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Noise.

That kid with the yukata that was with the fox-masked man at the underground parking lot. It seems he's not the same person. The kid with the yukata was hiding their face with a mask, so I can't say anything about that, but their stature is completely different. Noise-kun is on the small side, but that yukata kid was even more petite.

Then.....

Who's that kid in the yukata?

The other candidates would be the professional killers or the assassin, but because of their characteristics, it's probably not them (The professional killers are twins, and the assassin doesn't show his appearance in front of people). So excluding the three that Izumu-kun has met, considering his age, it's not Kajou Akira, and if it's not the swordsmith or the thought manipulator that operate more in the background, then it's that puppeteer, Migishita Rurero?

“BasiCally, it’s a PROblem of motiVAtion.”

Noise-kun said with his high pitched voice.

“For MR. Fox, you’re the eneMY he was alwayS searching for and that he FInally fouNd. His souL is trembling and he’s agoniZING in pleaSUre! MeeTINg you here was uNUsually good forTune.”

To make the world end.

To see the end of the world. The enemy.

How long has he been thinking about that?

Was it since the time he met Kuchiha-chan?

No, not then. If I remember correctly, it’s from even before that.

For the fox-masked man, meeting Kuchiha-chan was just a means. Even before that, he had always wished to see the end of the world.

He wanted to know the world’s end.

Even after being expelled from causality, he didn’t give up.

That’s why.

He gathered talented people to make the world end.

It’s probably like that for the *Thirteen Stairs*,

And.

For me as well.

“There’s a REAson that Mr. Fox made you his enemy, but flipping that aRound, what aBOUt you? *Ii-chaN*.”

“.....”

“From your point of VieW, isn’t Mr. Fox simply someONE that you suddenLy met last month, soMeone that you simpLY met on the sTreet without any connecTION?”

Noise-kun operated his headphones and apparently stopped the music, as the sound stopped leaking out of them. Based on the fact that there wasn’t any cord, this pair of headphones looked like an all-in-one music device.

“IF there’s no connection THEre’s no affiNIty. If there’s no hatred there’s no reSENTment. No causaLIty or anything. JUst a weird guy saying incompreHENsible stuff, right? He’s a weird gUy, but he’s just trying TO protect himself frOm the sparKs that are going to come down on hiM, isn’t it LIke that?”

“.....Who knows.”

“**That’s NO gooD**, *Ii-chan*.”

“.....”

“If you’RE Mr. FOx’s enemy, then the match is still one-SIded. Mr. Fox must be an eNEmy for you too. An attacK must be done for the saKE of

attacKING, it must neVer be an attack for the sake of deFENDing. And the way Mr. Fox sees iT, *Ii-chan*, the *NonSENse User*. There's not enough hatreD in your acTions."

"Not enough..."

"No, maybe there's NOne? THAt's what I thought just noW. Even though your neighBour became the tarGET of an unprovoked attack and one of those *eneMies* brazenly shows up in fronT Of you, you didn't even stand UP."

"I'm cool, like you said. Just cool. I'm just putting on airs."

"Even if that woman DIes, it looks like you'd SAY the same thing, *Ii-chan*."

"....."

"WEll, even then, did that MOtivate you a little BIT? Were you abLe to see Mr. Fox as an eNemy? You saiD you were disappoinTED by Mr. Fox, so why don't YOU take this opportunity to show him you're diSAppointed?"

".....Just for that, huh."

Just for that reason, Miiko-san got involved.

Just to make me mad.

Just to provoke me.

Just so that as the fox-masked man recognizes me as his enemy,

I should recognize the fox-masked man as my enemy.

Just for that.

I will kill, dismember, gather it up, line it up, and expose it.

Even though I said that properly.

So facing him with fear is not enough?

Is he saying that I should face him with hatred?

Is he saying that I should face him with the intent to kill?

Like Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

"At first, *Ii-chan*, it SEEms he planned to uSe Kino-san's trick oN you and put his LIFE on the line by turning you inTO an enemy, but at the last MOment, he must have thought thaT it would be BEtter to use the old-fashioneD hosTAGe strategy. He must HAve thought that seeing that woMan at the recepTion was a sign."

"Putting his life on the line?"

Those words... no, wait, what?

That means.

"Are you saying that..."

"EXActly. **There's an ANTIdote**."

"....."

"If you DrinK it, you're SAved. If you don't, you Die."

At this point, Noise-kun smiled boldly.

"If you Want the antiDOte, just come to the desiGNAted place at the designated TIme, that's all."

".....I intended to go from the start. I had no intention of running."

"EVen then, your motivation became toTAlly different, didn't it? Having an obJective Or not is totally difFERent. And when you wiLL eventually want to run away, now you no LONger can. Your optionS have been sealeD."

If I want to save Miiko-san, huh.

That's probably the only way to save her.

They can't do anything at the hospital.

Because they can't do anything, it's a *curse*.

At most, they could slow down the progression.

If the hospitalization was too late because Miiko-san was being stubborn, then it's painful.

"In that case, Noise-kun, stop saying such carefree things and take me to where the fox-masked man is. Every second is critical. There's no guarantee that her body will hold until the 30th."

"You don't nEEd to worry abOUT that. DesPIte what I said earlier, Mr. Fox doesn't liKe taking unpleaSANt means. It's what you'd call aesTheTics. If NuregINU-kun heard that, he'd laugh, but involVINg other people isn't beautiFUL."

"But currently....."

"BasiCAlly, you can think that her life's SAFEty is guaranTeed. At the very least, UNtil the 30th of SePtember. There's no point to KEEping a hostage if they're not safe, RIGht?"

"That's true, but....."

This time I stood up.

Moving my feet to face Noise-kun.

I stood up just in front of where he was sitting.

"As of right now, I don't see any reason for me to let you off the hook, Noise-kun."

".....So the cooL *Ii-chan* became a bit hot-heaDED? Looks like Mr. Fox's pLAN had an effeCT."

"Whether you refuse to take me with you or not, if I can get you to tell me the location of the fox-masked man by any means necessary, I won't have to wait until the 30th."

"That's a fine IDea, but it's impossiBle."

“Why do you think that? I’m pretty desperate right now. You can’t really know what I’ll do.”

“That’s obvious. AMOng the *ThirTeen STAirs*, I am a different TYpe than Kino-SAN or Nureginu-SAN, I have nothing whatsoever to dO with Mr. Fox’s taSteS. I was chosen to be IN *Thirteen StairS* for a sinGle Goal. **I ENTered thE *ThirtEEn Stairs just to FAce you. I am an Anti-Ii-chAn assassIn.”***

“Just to face me.....?”

So the reason Izumu-kun didn’t recognize him is because of that?

The assassin for me picked by Mr. Fox.

But what does that mean?

“Mr. Fox finisheD his research inTo you and then he piCKed me. That’s why you Won’t be able TO lay a finger on me. I’m goinG to predict that **you CAN’t do ANYthing to me**.”

“Hmm...” I shrugged. “Even a demonic killer didn’t talk to me with such a big mouth, Noise-kun.”

“NoIse-kUn, huh...”

Noise-kun twisted his lips in a meaningful way.

“But Noise is just soMEthing that Mr. Fox attached to me haphAZardly because he neeDed to take a NOte, **a sYmbol for the sake of a symBOL**. Before that, I was caLLed And.”

“.....”

“BeFOre that, GunKy.”

“.....”

“Before that, HArrier. Before thAT, NUMber Nineteen.”

“.....”

“BEfore that... **I wasn’t called anYthing**.”

Noise-kun.

No, the young boy in front of me stood up,

And moved his face right next to mine.

“Hey, *Ii-chaN*. **Does your SO-called nonsense worK against someone who DOesn’t have a NAme?**”

“.....!!”

“It seems I HIT the marK.”

The train slowed down.

The announcement echoed.

Next stop is Kyoto Station. Next stop is Kyoto Station.

The way to get off is on the left.

“Since the beGInning of the year, or rather, since you came back to JaPAN, you’ve been involved in a NUMber of cases and you’ve been able to solve those cases splenDIDly. You solved eveRY case. HOwever! There was ONE case you couldn’t SOlve, you couldn’t solve it without borROwing Aikawa-san’s helP. The *murder CAse* that happened in the manSion of the former heiress to the AKAgami family on WET Crow’s FeaTher IslanD.”

“.....Ugh.....”

“Because **the reAL culprit in that caSE didn’t have A name**.”

Her.

The nobody who doesn’t know who she is.

She who’s without even a name.

She who’s only interested in becoming other people,

Abandoning every style.

She who’s without a self.

She who’s without a name.

She who killed Sonoyama Akane.

She who replaced Sonoyama Akane.

I.

In the end, I couldn’t see through her scheme.

That’s.

That’s because...

“....We’ve arrived at the STATion.”

Noise-kun pointed towards the open door on the left.

“I’LL be waitinG for you in front of the schOOl gates of SuMIyuRI Academy the DAY after tomorrow. I’ll be a so-CAlled guide. I’m the only person in the *THIrteen Stairs* who can be saFE after speaKING with you besides Mr. Fox. THE next time we meet, I’m going to MAke you screaM.”

“.....”

“Get oFF. Do you intend to GO to the neXt staTION?”

“.....Just tell me one thing.”

I distanced myself from Noise-kun.

And got off the train.

From the platform, I turned towards Noise-kun and asked him a question.

“How does it feel to have a body and a soul without a name?”

“You know that BEtter than ME, don’t you?”

“I want to hear how you feel.”

“It’s so Obvious that you don’t eVEN need to ask, there’s ONly one anSwer.”

Noise-kun smiled widely.

“I feeL like DYing.”

The door closed.

The train with Noise-kun went towards the next station and left. Without feeling the need to follow it with my eyes until the end, I climbed the stairs up from the platform to the surface.

3

After paying an additional fee for parking (150 yen), I rode the Vespa back to the apartment. I was tired from yesterday's trip, so I decided I should leave my baggage on the ground and get some rest before continuing to act. It's best to leave the hospitalized Miiko-san to Suzunashi-san. There's nothing that I can do by staying at her side. I'm not worthy to hold Miiko-san's hand right now.

There are more actions I must take.

No matter what was said to me, no matter what kind of noise I heard, I had no intention of waiting patiently until the 30th. My motivation has certainly exploded, just as the fox-masked man wanted.

Driving on the Vespa far faster than the legal speed limit, I arrived at the parking lot in Nakadachiuri near the rundown apartment at record speed.

There.

Was one figure.

Leaning against Miiko-san's fiat, there was Houko-chan.

With her arms crossed.

Waiting for my slowed Vespa to arrive.

"....."

I parked the Vespa in my own designated space.

I turned the key, turning off the engine.

Houko-chan, with her arms crossed and without even trying to come closer, said, "welcome back, Nonsense User Onii-chan."

".....I'm back, Houko-chan."

"So something finally happened."

Houko-chan suddenly cut in.

Without any introduction, she cut in.

"What do you mean... about Miiko-san?"

"I was thinking that. I was thinking that soon, something would happen," Houko-chan said without mercy. "That's why I warned you so much."

"....."

"Did you notice? The last few days... rather, ever since you got out of the hospital, Onii-chan, you've been tailed by someone."

".....Tailed?"

Does she mean by someone else other than Houko-chan or Akari-san? Is she saying I didn't notice something like that?

.....No.

I even let Kino-san run away.

After all that, no matter what kind of mistake I make, I won't be surprised.

If that's the case, then did this person follow me all the way to Kyushu? Then I should consider that my meeting with Izumu-kun was reported. Obviously, since Mr. Fox was the one who set the stage for it, there won't be much damage, but....

"That's why I wanted to keep Onii-chan under surveillance. To be honest, it's usual for Onii-chan to be involved with weird things, but this time, I think it goes a bit too far."

".....Sorry that I made you worry. I misunderstood a bit, my bad." I examined my surroundings. "So am I still being followed as we speak?"

"No, it seems that you've already been released from it now. They've finished their mission is what they're saying. That tailing technique is something that's been passed down for a long time in my clan, so it's normal that Onii-chan didn't notice," Houko-chan said. "If it's someone that good, it's probably Nureginu-san."

"Nureginu... Yamiguchi Nureginu?"

"You know him?"

Houko-chan tilted her head slightly.

"Houko-chan, do you know him too?"

"Rather than just knowing him, he's a relative."

".....!"

I let out a gasp.

"Th-then perhaps, **the house from which you fled**..."

".....No, even if you exaggerate it and put it in bold, from my point of view, it's surprising that Onii-chan didn't notice until now."

Houko-chan looked fed up.

That's right, she swings knives around, she kills small animals, I thought she was just a strange kid, but then, maybe Moeta-kun too...

"Hah."

Houko-chan looked even more fed up.

"Ishinagi... the clan of reapers."

"So that was it....."

"So rather than playing dumb, you just didn't know....."

"Yes....."

"Didn't you at least think it was a bit suspicious?"

"No....."

"Even slightly?"

“Not at all.....”

“.....”

“Sorry.....”

Uwah.....

So even before meeting Zerozaki, I was living under the same roof as people from the world of *fairytales* and *dreams*.....

“Well, Moeta and I both left home before we started working, so we just stayed somewhat in obscurity and haven’t experienced murder yet.”

“That’s a relief....”

Does the fox-masked man know this fact? If even me, the person concerned, hadn’t noticed it, then it might be fair to say that he doesn’t know.

“Hmm. In life, you never know what’s going to happen. I didn’t expect this sort of twist...”

“Onii-chan, are you actually stupid?”

“No, it was just surprisingly hard to notice.”

“Apart from Onii-chan, I think everyone that should have noticed has already noticed.....”

“No, no, you surprisingly couldn’t tell about Hime-chan.”

“Hime-nee-sama is... no, it’s fine.”

Houko-chan let out a big sigh.

I felt like I was being looked down upon.

“Well... that’s why, to be honest, I have a pretty good idea of the situation. That disease that Mii-nee-san has, I suspect that it’s the work of Kino.”

“Yes. Well, if you know that much, I’ll tell you everything.”

“I hope so.”

“I’ll start from the beginning of everything.”

Just in case, I took another look both ways. I didn’t see anyone for now. However, thinking about the possibility of being heard by someone passing by, we should head indoors... no. Thinking about it this much, I reconsidered. We’re already at a stage where we don’t need to worry about that. Even if we were heard, it’s not something we can do something about. If something could be done, I would rather prefer it to be done. Things will probably not get any worse than they are now.

At this point, it’s already the worst.

Houko-chan listened to my story with almost no reaction and with almost no interjections, as if she wasn’t paying any attention, without changing her expression at all. She slightly knit her eyebrows and made an unpleasant face when she heard the name at the top of the *Killing Names*, the Niounomiya

Troupe, and also when heard the name Yamiguchi Nureginu among the *Thirteen Stairs*. However, it was just that, and she didn't say anything.

And Kino Raichi.

"……..That's how it is."

After finishing telling everything, I didn't feel like I told everything at all. That's right, no matter how completely you tell it, you can't communicate all of the background. If the background of the story is missing, it becomes woefully inadequate.

But for an outline, it should be enough.

Houko-chan said, "I see."

"Now that I understand the situation this well, it's a mystery how Moeta and I were out of the loop."

"Yeah……."

It's probably because I didn't notice.

If you let Assistant Professor Kigamine and the fox-masked man talk, they would surely have said with a special tone, as if rolling their tongues, and above all in an indescribable way, that it was the connection of fate, the convergence of inevitability, but because of me it was a meaningless foreshadowing of what was to come.

"But then," Houko-chan said with her arms still crossed and without changing her posture. "From here on, it's something within our domain, isn't it?"

"No… but, Houko-chan," I said, a little flustered. I was responsible for Miiko-san, so I talked about it, but I don't intend to get Houko-chan involved. I only spoke because I couldn't hide it. "Not noticing your family was careless of me, but Houko-chan, didn't you say it before? That the reason you left your house was because you didn't like the family business. You said the same about Moeta-kun."

"……."

Houko-chan's eyes were cold.

Like ice, no.

As cold as a metal.

"I got out because I wanted to be a normal girl. That's what I said, didn't I?"

"Did you?"

"I did."

She did.

As I recall, that was when I had just moved into the apartment. I couldn't stand the thought of a child this young living alone with her brother without a guardian and without going to school, so I brought up the topic.

At that time, I didn't know much about Houko-chan. I think I know her better now. At least, more than I did at that time.

That's why.

I can't involve Houko-chan.

I can't involve her like Miiko-san.

"In the end, you can't escape being born and growing up, Nonsense User Onii-chan. The soul of a child of three is the same at 100."

".....Houko-chan."

Those words.

They're not just about Moeta-kun and herself.

They're pointed at Yukariki Ichihime.

And they're pointed at me.

"In the first place, I'm a woman of low character by nature."

"....."

"They also say the fair-skinned are cursed for seven generations."

"Houko-chan....."

If you're going to say that, it's "hide the seven misfortunes" (did she hear this from Hime-chan?), but this wasn't a situation where I could make a retort over such small stuff.

"Well, it was only for a few years, no different than the blink of an eye, but let's just say that I had a good dream as if I were a butterfly."

"A dream... that's not the case."

However, if you say it like that, then it's even more so.

Then it's really like Hime-chan all over again

Like me all over again.

What a farce of pre-established harmony.

How many times do I have to repeat this?

How many times does it need to repeat?

Victim and perpetrator and damage and assault.

How many substitutes have been prepared?

There's no replacement.

How many times do I need to say it for you to understand?

"Houko-chan, you..."

"I guess it's been something that's been decided and predetermined for a long time. It's just a matter of chance. For Mii-nee-san and Nonsense User

Onii-chan to meet an existence like me when you were in trouble, it's too much to be a coincidence. The existence of the *Story*, I don't mind believing it somewhat."

".....Your normal life... will you throw it away?"

"Even if you say normal, I'm nothing more than a nonhuman wearing the skin of a human. That's why it's fine."

Houko-chan said.

"I will take off my human skin."

It was an instant.

I was only distracted for an instant.

For just an instant, I felt fear towards Houko-chan.

The hair on my skin stood up and shivers ran down my spine.

But.

It was in that instant.

That a knife had stabbed through my shirt.

At the center of my chest, a knife pierced deeply.

It was Houko-chan's knife.

The one she used sometimes when she peeled apples at the hospital.

That knife.

The butterfly knife.

That's.

The blade penetrating my organs.

"Onii-chan, please rest a bit."

".....Houko-cha-"

Thonk, my legs collapsed.

What's this.....

It's hot. Even though it doesn't hurt, I can't breathe. I can't put any strength into my body. I can't stay standing. I crouched under Houko-chan's feet.

Houko-chan hadn't even uncrossed her arms.

Without even uncrossing her arms, how.....

Before I knew it.

As if time had skipped, I couldn't sense it.

So this is a *Killing Name*?

Are you saying... that this is a Yamiguchi?

Then it goes beyond overboard.

“I don’t want to see Onii-chan get hurt anymore. Onii-chan’s wounds... I can’t bear to see them. I said that before, didn’t I?”

“.....Guuuuuh.”

“When you saw Mii-nee-san in the hospital, you felt pain didn’t you, Onii-chan? Then please stop now.”

“.....”

“Please stop. Let’s end it now. There’s no need for Onii-chan to get hurt anymore. Onii-chan doesn’t need to suffer any longer.”

Houko-chan sofly walked towards me.

She uncrossed her arms and held my aching head with them.

“Onii-chan, you’ve been fighting all by yourself, haven’t you? With all kinds of people. In many places. Without anyone knowing. Always alone, always getting hurt.”

“.....”

“You’ve really done a good job until now.”

“.....Aaaaah.”

“So I think it’s time for you to get some rest now.”

My consciousness...

It’s fading.

I can’t see.

As if there was a fog.

As if there was a mist.

As if there was a haze.

I can’t see.

It’s fading.

My consciousness.....

“When thou art dry, I shalt give thee my blood. When thou feel starved, I shalt give thee my flesh. I shalt atone for thy sins. I shalt repay for thy errors. I shalt bear thy mission. I shalt receive thy epidemics. I shalt present all mine honor to thee. I shalt offer all mine glory to thee. I shalt follow alongside thee as a barrier. I shalt delight along with thy delight. I shalt sorrow along with thy sorrow. I shalt live along thee as a scout. I shalt support your exhausted bones with mine entire body. These hands shalt become thine and grab a weapon. These legs shalt become thine and step against others. These eyes shalt become thine and capture enemies. I shalt fulfill thy lust with all mine power. I shalt wholeheartedly service thee. I shalt throw mine name away for thee. I shalt throw mine pride away for thee. I shalt throw mine ideals away for thee. I shalt love thee. I shalt worship thee. I shalt not feel anything but

thee. I shalt not be captured by anything but thee. I shalt not wish for anything other than thee. I shalt not lust for anything other than thee. I shalt not sleep without thy permission. I shalt not breathe without thy permission. Just one word, I shalt only search for a reason in thy word. This miserable and pitiable me who is not even worth a lowly slave for thee. I swear this here."

".....Houko....."

Houko-chan's voice echoed as if it was somebody else's problem.

It was as if I could hear it, but not hear it.

What is she saying?

I still have things I must do.

I must.

It's my responsibility.

I must be the one to get hurt.

I must get hurt.

"Onii-chan doesn't have to get hurt anymore."

Houko-chan said with a strong and calm tone.

".....Nonsense User Onii-chan, you don't need to do anything. Leave everything to me. It's about time for you to relax."

"....."

"Good night, Onii-chan."

Softly.

Houko-chan took her hands away from me.

Losing my support, I collapsed onto the parking lot's ground.

I couldn't grasp anything.

I felt the knife go in even deeper.

I felt the sensation of blood on my body.

I heard footsteps.

With small strides.

The footsteps of someone leaving.

Getting farther and farther away.

Becoming unhearable.

The asphalt against my cheek felt awfully cold.

Cold.

Cold.

Cold.

Cold.

C o l d.

.....

I kind of feel like sleeping.

ACT 6 – INVESTIGATION AND SUBSTITUTION

0

A white frozen blade and a red burnt blade.
Choose the one you want to cut with and the one you want to be cut with.
A blade for a blade.

1

When I woke up, I was on a hospital bed.

"I-I'm surprised……."

I thought the series was over.

Rather.

I thought I had died for good this time.

My joints felt sore so I tried to move around, but after feeling a twitching pain in my chest, I stopped and returned to my original position.

"You shouldn't move."

Looking over suddenly.

By the side of the bed, a nurse, Rabumi-san, was sitting on a chair and reading a hardcover book. From what I could see, she closed the book and adjusted her glasses and then, after a pause.

"Ii~, welcome back."

She said.

"I mean, don't come back after less than ten days. Even a middle schooler running away from home has more guts."

"……."

I see, so I was transported to the hospital.

That's right, I, with Houko-chan……

"It was a close one. If it had been one second later, Ii~, you'd be dead."

"……It wasn't really one second though, right?"

"At the very least, it was the biggest pinch up until now. You lost a lot of blood. I mean, your organs were cut so precisely that even me, a nurse, was impressed. It was a completely lethal wound."

"Lethal wound……"

Seriously?

She really has no mercy.

"It's a good thing your stomach was empty or it really wouldn't have been a joke. No, it's already not a joke. What? Are you on a diet or something?"

“A diet.....”

Ah, that’s right, I was absorbed in the conversation in Kyushu that I ended up only drinking coffee. After that, I didn’t have the time to feed my empty stomach.....

“It looked like a knife wound, but who did it to you?”

“It’s a lover’s quarrel. I tried to force myself on a thirteen-year-old girl, but she unexpectedly fought back.”

“Wait a minute, I’ll go call the police.”

“Haha, it’s an assault charge, right?”

“No, rape.”

“It was a joke.”

“It’s not a joke.”

No, it’s a joke, isn’t it?

I mean.....

I looked at the clock in the hospital room.

Afternoon. Well, it’s probably not that only a few hours have passed since then, so it must be the next day. It seems that I’ve been sleeping for an entire day.

“Not one day,” Rabumi-san said. “You slept for two days.”

“.....Huh?”

“Today’s like the 30th of September.”

“Like?”

Even though she’s an adult?

No, that’s not the focus here.

“It’s already the 30th?”

“That’s right.”

“.....”

I hurriedly tried to raise my body, which was lying on its back, but I was stopped by Rabumi’s quick movements.

“I told you not to move, didn’t I? If you move without thinking, your wound will reopen easily. Like a snap. We just stitched it together, so you need to be careful. We haven’t even removed the stitches yet.”

“.....I need to go.”

“Huh?”

“I have a place I need to go to.”

“.....You know, Ii~,in this world there’s the expression complete rest. The current you definitely needs that.”

“Guh,” I was pushed against the bed. As if to remind me, Rabumi-san put more force into her hands and then released me.

“I don’t know where you need to go, but it’s the same as going to die. You need to cancel it, cancel. It’s not a date with a girl or something, right?”

“It’s definitely not something that nice.”

Even without an injury.

It’d be the same as heading to my death.

“But.....”

“In this situation, there’s no buts. It’s a serious injury, isn’t it? You were in a critical condition. The ambulance was packed with doctors. You were in the ICU yesterday, and now your consciousness finally came back. Your condition was even more serious than Asano-san’s.”

“Miiko-san.....” Ah, that’s right. Miiko-san is in this hospital too. “Rabumi-san, how is Miiko-san’s condition?”

“It keeps getting worse.”

“You said that rather plainly.”

“Because it’s useless to lie to you.”

Rabumi-san looked at me slowly, from top to bottom, as if staring into me.

“.....Was that also your fault?”

“That’s right. Though I can’t give you the details. Even if I did, you wouldn’t believe me. But at the very least, I feel a certain amount of responsibility for what happened to Miiko-san.”

“How serious.”

Rabumi-san smiled bitterly.

“Look at me. Even as we speak, I make it look like I’m attending to you, but I’m actually just avoiding doing the paperwork I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Please do your work.”

“You’re carrying too much weight. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“...Yeah.”

It was told to me by Miiko-san.

Right.

That’s right.

She said that I’m carrying too much of everything.

Well, that’s probably true.

That’s right, there’s no words for it.

Other people's lives are too heavy to carry, they're not something that's meant to be carried. Not to mention, I can't even control my own life……

Not to mention.

……Right.

It might have been too great of a role for me.

No matter how much the fox-masked man sees me as an enemy.

In the end, I'm just a guy with a broken bottom.

Houko-chan could probably see that.

To a detestable degree.

To a detestable degree, she could see it.

A vessel full of cracks.

A vessel full of wounds.

To the point that it's hard to watch.

If this is a story.

Maybe my role is already over.

The opening act is over.

Now it's Houko-chan's and Moeta-kun's turn.

"……"

But to think that those two were…

Maybe I was the weird one for not noticing, but if that's the case, maybe it really is for the best to leave the rest to them.

I guess you could say that they're the right people in the right place.

If there's someone like Noise-kun in the *Thirteen Stairs*, then my role is nothing more than a speck of dust.

That's why.

That's why the rest is a problem of pride.

My pride.

A problem.

A problem, and a solution.

"Say, Rabumi-san."

"What? Being formal isn't like you."

"No, I don't think this is really the kind of thing I should say in a hospital, but for me, it's pretty hard to live."

"Hmm. Is that so."

"What about Rabumi-san?"

"Not really. There are times when I feel like it's a pain, but yeah, I guess I'm generally doing just fine."

"Is that so……"

“You know, I’ve been doing this job since I was still a trainee. It’s like this hospital is my home now.”

Rabumi-san said.

“That’s why I hate people who don’t feel like living.”

“……”

“It’s the same even outside of the hospital. I hate those idiots that only pretend to be alive. I think that anyone who’s not thinking about a better tomorrow would be better off dead.”

“……Right.”

They should die.

It’ll be easier if they die.

Once you die, it’s over.

“You know, Rabumi-san, I’ve caused a lot of people trouble in my life. Bringing misfortune and disaster to many people, that’s how I lived. I’ve dragged in everyone around me, without exception.”

Making the gravity around me go crazy.

Making the coordinates around me go crazy.

Making them crazy, then making them even more crazy.

Nothing goes as planned.

Everything is vague.

Everything is doubtful.

What arises is surely just an insignificant detail.

But because of that insignificant detail.

Everyone becomes unhappy.

Not able to move any further.

Reaching their limits.

Converging.

Accelerating.

You’re a nuisance to others just by staying alive.

That’s why you’d be better off dead.

“It’s been like that since I was a kid. Right, thinking about it now, I should really be aware of it by this point. The word “troublemaker” can’t fully describe it. The people around me get hurt and end up dead. Nothing ever goes well, nothing ever goes as planned. I saw the whole thing coming from the start, you know. I knew that nothing was going to work out. That’s why I preferred being half hearted and unreliable.”

I preferred not producing results.

Because I knew it'd become something bad either way.

Because I knew nothing good would come out.

That's why.

I just wanted to avoid the worst.

"Maybe I was the one making the Story go mad. Even though it was coherent, with proper development, with good composition, with a plot that had its ups and downs for entertainment, and, well, with a few misprints and errors, but even then, they just gave it some charm. It made you laugh and, more than that, it was enjoyable. It made you cry when you were supposed to. It was that kind of Story. And just by myself, I ruined it."

I've ruined the foreshadowing

I ruined the Story.

For the fortune-teller who had the power of reading the Story, for Himena Maki, I really was just an annoying existence. Even more so than a "misprint" like Kunagisa Tomo, I was an annoying existence.

And the fox-masked man.

From the perspective of that man who greedily desires to see the end of the world, the end of the Story. An existence that originally should never have existed, that should be an impossibility like me or that demonic killer, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, we're probably something that cannot be ignored.

Because of that, it goes crazy again.

Even Miiko-san's story goes crazy.

Even Houko-chan's story goes crazy.

For the fox-masked man, it's surely something to laugh at.

That person doesn't recognize individual stories.

He doesn't recognize individuality.

No matter who does it, it's the same.

No matter who it is, it's the same.

When you get right down to it, the one to witness the end of the world doesn't even have to be him. He would probably go that far.

He doesn't think anything about denying himself.

Denial and affirmation are synonymous.

Denial and affirmation are equivalent.

But I.

I am completely.

Repeatedly now, I've said a lot of things.

But all of that wasn't serious.

It was just lies.
It was all nonsense.
Ah……
Who was it again that named me the Nonsense User?
"I'm really a bother. I know that myself. The things that everyone spends a long time building up, I come along and trip their legs and make it all collapse. That's the case even when I'm not thinking about anything. And when it comes to things that I hate or things that I come to like, anything that has even a little bit of my will mixed in, it's even more devastating. That's why when my sister died I decided."
Yes, I decided.
That was the first time I made a decision in my life.
The first and last decision.
That was the only thing that wasn't nonsense, it was a real decision.
All other decisions were just an extension of that one.
Without any meaning.
At that time, I made that decision.
"That I will not like anyone and I will not hate anyone."
I won't give anything to anyone.
That's why I won't receive anything.
Rejecting everything.
That was the Nonsense User's only pride.
I decided to not care about other people's existence.
The me who could like people.
Decided to not like anyone
I refused to be liked by anyone.
For my own sake, and for the sake of others.
The me who could kill people.
Decided to not kill anyone.
I also decided to not kill myself.
I decided to not become a demonic killer.
"That's how it should have been, and yet…"
I did it again.
I've ruined it again.
I'm really sorry.
I want to apologize.
Who should I apologize to?
The back that I want to apologize to, whose back is it?

“Why did things become like this?”
Why.
Does everyone break that easily?
Isn’t it funny?
It’s absurd.
Even though I didn’t wish for anything.
Even though I didn’t resent anything.
“That’s why I already...”
There’s a monster inside my body.
Even calling it inhuman would be disgusting.
“I already, since a long time ago...”
As if there was nothing left.
As if there was no body, spirit, mind, soul,
Or even a name.
It goes without saying, you don’t even have to ask...

“...Felt like dying.”

I glanced at Rabumi-san.
She was dozing off.
“.....”
“Huh? Did you finish talking?”
“.....Yes.”
“Yeah. Right. Well, how pitiable. Err, then, if you want to die, why not just die?”
It was a half-minded impression.
It wasn’t even meant to be a scolding.
“I told you, I hate those who say they want to die.”
“.....Of course you do, Rabumi-san.”
“What’s that? It feels like you’re making fun of me.”
“I’m just envious.”
“Won’t you stop talking like you’re looking at things from afar? I’m talking to you face to face.”
“No matter how close we talk, my feelings will never get transmitted to Rabumi-san.”
To those who have never thought of wanting to die.
I want to die.
I want to die.

I want to die.
I want to die right now.
And to the same extent, I don't want to die.
I don't want to die.
That's what I thought.
After Hime-chan's death, that's what I thought.
But ultimately that's just another heretical idea.
The people living normally.
Do they really not wish to die?
Not wishing.
They don't even realize that they're alive.
Living isn't a miracle to them.
It's a miracle for me.
It's an impossible miracle.
I want to die.
However, I absolutely don't want to die.
Even if I think that I don't want to die...
The feeling of wanting to die doesn't go away.
"Rabumi-san cannot understand how I feel."
"Certainly, I may not understand your feelings. After all, you're really quite incomprehensible," Rabumi-san prefaced with that before continuing, "but the feelings of the people that were around you... well, I kind of understand them."
"....."
"Like I said before, I've been doing this job for quite a while. A lot of people come to the hospital with various physical and mental wounds. A wound is, no matter what you say, always painful enough to make you want to cry. That's the same for everyone."
"....."
"Well, misfortune is contagious. If one person is unhappy, then everyone around that person will be unhappy too. Even if you think that other people's misfortune tastes as sweet as honey, if you go too far, it'll just make you feel bad. That's why all the people who come to the hospital, whether they're patients, their relatives, or visitors, all have a very depressing look on their faces."
The air is dark, Rabumi-san said.
The air is dark, stagnant.
No matter how beautifully you decorate the hallways and rooms.

No matter how much you polish the windows and hallways.

You can't decorate the air.

You can't polish the air.

"That's why I'm doing my best to brighten up the atmosphere in the hospital, but..."

"Eh....."

So there was a serious reason for that personality?

No matter how you think about it, it's not natural.

Rabumi-san grinned.

"I think that it might not be necessary for your case."

I think, she repeated.

"Despite this being the sixth time you've been in the hospital this year, a lot of people have come to visit you in that time. People from your apartment building, that blue haired girl, that girl who looks like a model. I brought many people to your hospital room."

"....."

"All of them had good faces."

Rabumi-san said a bit bashfully.

"The people around you all looked happy."

".....Happy....."

"You're making everyone around you happier than you know and I think they like you a lot more than you think they do."

".....Rabumi-san....."

Someone who likes me unconditionally.

Someone who is saved just by me being alive.

Someone like that.

If they existed.

If there was even one.

"Well, maybe they were just in a good mood because a guy that they hate is in the hospital."

"....."

She tagged on a punchline.

This person really does unbelievable things.

Rabumi-san said, "well then..." and stood up from the pipe chair.

"I should really get to work now."

"This was also a good job."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. That's what I think."

“I’m glad to hear that.”

And Rabumi-san turned to leave the room.

Right when she was about to put her hand on the door, she turned back.

“Ah, right, right. Ii~.”

“.....What is it?”

“After I leave, no doctors will come to see you until five in the evening. Also that maid you’re living with brought a change of clothes so I put them in the locker, but you absolutely must not sneak out of the room,” Rabumi-san put up a finger and said. “Do you understand? If you understood, then give me a clear answer.”

“.....”

I.

I firmly nodded.

“I understand, Rabumi-san.”

“Hey, hey, not like that. I meant to say that you could leave without anyone noticing. I swear, you’re really dense.”

“No, I understood that much.”

“I was really cool today, wasn’t I?”

“Well, just a little.....”

“Fufufu. I’m always joking around so that, when the time comes, I can say cool lines like that.”

“That’s a very useless effort.....”

What happened to the mood of the hospital?

“Nyahaha.”

She laughed.

Rabumi-san waved and left the hospital room.

.....

She’s still a weird nurse.

But, well, right.

I guess I was a little cheered up.

Well, it’s as usual. I can’t move forward or backward or anywhere else without someone pushing me from behind.

Now then.

This time it’s my turn to show off.

Let’s settle the usual nonsense.

Slowly, I got out of bed.

The pain in my chest.

It’s fine, I can still walk if I’m careful.

It’s not a problem as long as I avoid strenuous exercise.
“……Isn’t it enough already?”
I’ve had enough of dying.
It’s time to start living soon.

It’s already the 30th of September.
There’s only a little until the end of it all.

2

After changing clothes and sneaking out of the hospital, I decided to take a taxi to the apartment. There's no subways, buses, or trains that run close to it, and it's too great of a distance to walk home. I also didn't have the luxury of time. Sumiyuri Academy, the place the fox-masked man designated as the location of the party, should still be quite a long distance away. Last time I went there (of course, the academy wasn't in ruins at that point, it still operated normally), I was in the passenger seat of Aikawa-san's car, and I was also unconscious for half of the ride, so I didn't know how long it would take. But still, I was certain that it would take a few hours to get there with Miiko-san's Fiat.

I had to hurry.

That being said, I couldn't really head there directly as it would be way too reckless to go empty handed. I can't be that bold. I haven't reached that point. That's why I needed to return to the apartment.

"……"

You might think this is trivial at a time like this, but using a taxi in Kyoto is, well, humiliating……

I arrived at the apartment.

As one would expect, I put my guard up.

The wound on my chest was throbbing.

Well, I think Houko-chan and Moeta-kun left for Sumiyuri Academy long ago, but I still couldn't avoid being tense.

If they find out that I had slipped out of the hospital, I could get killed for real this time…….

Scary scary.

I entered the apartment's premises while being cautious of my surroundings. I went up to the second floor, careful not to make any noise as the floor creaked. The only people living upstairs are me and Miiko-san, and since she's in the hospital right now, I didn't need to worry about what was ahead.

I unlocked the door and went into my room.

In my house for the first time in three days, huh…..

Well, it hasn't been long enough for me to get nostalgic about it and I didn't have time for that anyways. And, of course, it wasn't a fitting situation. If I didn't hurry with my preparations, it would be too late.

The weapons I have are…

Since I shot the rest of the Jericho bullets last month, it was no good. If I had the time, I could have gotten some more ammo, but……

So I'm limited to just the knives, huh.

The thin-bladed knife and the lock-picking knife.

The thin-bladed one came with a holster.

"Hmm……"

I'm somewhat uneasy. These are knives that I've been using for a long time, but that's not very reliable. Even if I only had knives, I'm not Zerozaki, so they would only be a bother…..

Suddenly, I looked at the wall.

Or rather, the next room.

"Hmm……"

Right, I should borrow Miiko-san's expandable baton. I'm sure there are some Japanese swords among the antiques that I could use, but unfortunately I'm not used to handling swords, including wooden ones. As long as I didn't use the baton as a sword, I'd be able to handle it. Even if I don't use it as a weapon, a baton can't be that bothersome.

After leaving my room, I went to Miiko-san's room and unlocked it with the lock-picking knife and, after apologizing for the intrusion, entered. The layout of the room was the same, and I've been in this room a few times, so I knew what I was doing. Well, even if I knew what I was doing, I still felt guilty for entering without permission, but it was an emergency situation, and it wasn't like I was here to do anything to be guilty over.

"Ah, that's right."

Since it's a good time, let's borrow something from Hime-chan's room too.

I paid the rent for that room two months in advance, so Hime-chan's room should still be as it was last left since it hasn't yet been rearranged. I wanted to borrow Hime-chan's famous *strings*. Of course, using string techniques is something that's far from possible for me, but *strings* are way more practically useful than a baton.

However, there's Nanananami on the first floor……

At this time……

I would appreciate it if she were at university.

I locked Miiko-san's room and went downstairs. Tiptoeing past Nanananami's room, I made it to Hime-chan's room. I snuck in (feeling like a petty thief) and rummaged around the small room that felt even smaller with the bed.

It wasn't long before I found what I was looking for.
Like that, I was ready to go.
This should probably be enough.
"……..Why is this happening two months in a row?"
I emptied the contents of my bag on Hime-chan's bed and rearranged them. If I positioned things in an easy to access way, it would count when the time came. Last month, I only had to deal with one person, but this month, it's against thirteen people…….
One and thirteen is completely different.
Well…….
I just need to repeat the same thing thirteen times.
Repeating things is my speciality.
Even if it's involuntary, it's my specialty.
"There. That should suffice."
Now my luggage was ready. All I had to do now was put on my holster and then my jacket and I'd be done. Because of the season, I've been wearing only shirts these days, but without a jacket the holster would be completely visible and uncool. Well then, now to return to my room one last time.
And when I turned around.

"……"

Someone came into the room.
There was no sign of the door opening or closing.
They were standing right behind me.
For a moment, I thought it was Nanananami, so I prepared my knife.
But I was wrong.
That wasn't the case.
"I have brought…"
She.
Chiga Hikari-san spoke.
"Some clothing."
"……"
There was a jacket in her arms.
My jacket.
"Is something the matter?"
"No……"

I put the knife away, shifted my posture, sat down on the bed, and turned my head to face the small statured woman, whose eyes were almost even to mine.

Hikari-san.....

It looks like she noticed everything.

Then...

"...You must be fed up, right?"

"I am not really fed up or anything."

Hikari-san smiled gently.

"I think it's typical of you."

"Typical of me, huh....."

It sounded self-deprecating, even if it was unintentional.

"You know, Hikari-san, I've been told by your little sister, Teruko-san, that guys like me would be better off dead. That people living with a frightening monster inside them are too selfish."

".....Oh my," Hikari-san smiled bitterly as if it couldn't be avoided. "Well, Teruko has her own way of thinking."

"Teruko-san's way of thinking.....?"

"That girl was probably jealous of you."

"Jealous? Of who? Me?"

"Or perhaps envious," Hikari-san said. "Either way, I guess Teruko didn't recognize that you and her are of the same kind."

"Same kind, huh....."

An alternative, you could say

Certainly.

Teruko-san and I were able to get through to each other.

At the very least, unilaterally from my side.

"Well, it seems like I'm similar to everyone else. But if you want to talk about people who are the same kind as me, there's only a demonic killer. I wonder where he is now....."

"You are only you."

Hikari-san, for some reason, said with a strong and harsh tone that I had never heard from her before.

"There's no replacement for you anywhere. That's why there's no one of your kind anywhere."

".....Then it's fine."

If that's the case, it's fine.

If that's the case, then it would have been nice.

I mumbled to myself, powerlessly.

I became somewhat timid.

As I thought, it's no good.

I'm being spoiled.

When there's a sweet person in front of me, I end up wanting to be spoiled.

In a sense.

She was the person I shouldn't have met, even more so than Nanananami.

Chiga Hikari.

"In April, when I left that island..." I said. "Iria-san asked me to stay. That was the first time I was invited. Staying on the island and becoming a family."

"A family....."

"I should have done that. I should have cut all ties with this side and retired. If I had done that, at the very least, I wouldn't have bothered the people in this apartment anymore."

I wouldn't have caught the eyes of the worst.

I wouldn't have made the Story go mad.

Even if it went mad, it wouldn't have been to this point.

Not to this point.

"Even if you did that, I think the result would've been the same. Maybe the progression would've been a bit slower?" Hikari-san rejected my thinking. "The previous owner of this room, if I remember correctly, was Yukariki Ichihime?"

".....She was. Did Aikawa-san tell you about that?"

"A little. Her nickname was Hime-chan or something?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Himena Maki-san too. It seems she had the same nickname she had when she was a child."

"Eh?"

"**Hime-chan**."

Hikari-san seemed to be enjoying herself a bit.

"If you were there when Himena-san was killed, you would have surely had the same reaction as you did when Yukariki-san was killed, wouldn't you?"

"....."

That person, I hated her.

I really hated her.

I really hated her, but.

Even then, if she were to die in front of me.

At that time, probably.
I'm sure.
I wouldn't have stayed as I was.
"Then the place you're in is the same."
Maki-san.
She had confirmed that her own death would happen two years later.
Then that's just what it is.
In the end, I...
Even if I were able to make the Story go mad,
No matter how much I accelerated it,
Stopping it,
And escaping it is impossible.
Is that how it is?
Are you saying that's how it is?
Maki-san.
She didn't tell me anything.
That's because, in the end, she understood.
That no matter how much she struggled, nothing would change.
But.....
No, but.
But that's why.
Even she.
Couldn't foresee what would happen after her death.
I see. I realized it too late.
Now, without a prophet, it's completely unknown territory for everyone.
From here on out, it really can't be read.
The fox-masked man created such a situation.
The motive for killing Maki-san, was that it?
It wasn't exactly a lie to say that it would've been annoying to be told where the Story is going, but that wasn't the primary objective. That's because, even if you could say that she could see the end of the world, the end of the Story, you could definitely not say that **she could read it**.
The fox-masked man, by killing Maki-san...
He brought chaos to the Story.
Just like when I was plunged into chaos.
When Hime-chan was killed.
"It's not unrelated to Himena-san's murder, is that what you meant when you said those words that day?"

"Well, that's about it."

"...Is that so. how should I put this... you know, Hikari-san, I'm just a regular, dull, useless guy that can't be saved, but there used to be a time where I wasn't like that....."

"What do you mean you weren't like that?"

"I was more of a cool, dry, twisted brat who wouldn't lift a finger for anyone else...."

"Certainly, I can imagine that."

"I'm laughable, right? You're fed up with me, aren't you? Right now I'm pushing through a chest injury for Miiko-san's sake. I'm moving towards a certain death. Forgetting the life I led, forgetting who I was, and moving for the sake of other people. After having hurt a lot of people, I'll try to help at least one. Though, I say helping, but it was my fault in the first place. Saying words of self-sacrifice even though I don't know my place. Really, I must surely look extremely pathetic."

"I don't think so," Hikari-san said. "I don't think you're such a cold-hearted person towards others. First of all, isn't that the case for Tomo-san?"

"About Kunagisa, again, it's my fault..." I answered. "Also, being next to Kunagisa doesn't have to be my role in particular. Kunagisa just needed someone, it's not like she needed me specifically. That's why I **took advantage** of that."

"That may be so," Hikari-san nodded. "But apart from you, who could be besides Tomo-san?"

"....."

"I'm sure no one else other than you could have loved Kunagisa Tomo. You were able to save her because you were you."

Hikari-san calmly said.

Still with a strong and stern voice.

"If you've forgotten, then try remembering. You were always working for someone else, weren't you?"

".....Eh?"

"In April, you did your best for Sonoyama-san, me, and Tomo-san. I heard about what happened afterwards from Kasugai-san. In May, for your classmate Emoto-san. In June, for Yukariki Ichihime. In July, again, or rather, as always, for Tomo-san's sake. And last month too."

"....."

"You're always moving for the sake of someone around you. You get hurt for the sake of someone else. You get injured so that others won't get hurt.

There might be people who can't stand to see that because it's so painful, but I want to keep watching you. I think you're wonderful. That's why, certainly, as you say, you may be laughable and I may be fed up with you, but no matter how much you pretend to be troubled…"

"…There's no way that such a wonderful person would do nothing in this situation."

I.

Took my luggage and stood up.

Hikari-san spread the jacket and walked behind me, making my arms go through the sleeves. Her movements were so smooth, I didn't feel any hesitation.

I swear.

You're the best maid.

The maid among maids.

I can't be satisfied with other maids anymore.

She makes me quiver.

"No, that's not the case at all."

Hikari-san walked around to face me, fixed the details of my clothes, and then took two steps back, distancing herself from me.

"You can buy my loyalty with money."

"……"

"However, your courage is irreplaceable. Have pride in yourself. It's only been a short time, but I feel honored to have been able to serve someone like you."

Then.

Hikari-san grabbed the ends of her skirt.

And bowed deeply.

"Please be safe, master. I'll wait for your return."

"I'm off!"

To that strength that certainly wasn't weakness,

To that kindness that certainly wasn't softness,

I turned my back.

And stepped out into the apartment's hallway.

The creaking hallway.

The dim hallway.

I took up residence in this apartment shortly after I dropped out of the ER program and came back to Japan.

It was Miiko-san's recommendation.

For Miiko-san, the people living here are like family, that's what Suzunashi-san said.

Honestly, I don't really understand what a family is. The only person I'm close enough to call them family is Kunagisa.

But this place has a nice atmosphere.

If Miiko-san wasn't here, it would crumble.

Everyone would be sad.

Even Ukigumo-san, even Hime-chan.

I can't do something like that.

I can't forgive something like that.

That reminds me.

It seems the Zerozaki clan was a group that placed family bonds above anything else, but that would mean that demonic killer, Zerozaki Hitoshiki... I wonder if he ever felt like that.

I feel like he may have, or maybe not.

Once more.

If I could meet him once more.

I'd like to ask him about his family.

I don't think I'll ever see him again, and I don't want to, but considering my past experience, it seems that in most cases when I think I'll never see someone again, I end up reuniting with them. So even if the theory of Zerozaki Hitoshiki's death is true, I felt that I might end up meeting him again soon.

For that.

First, I need to survive through this September.

Exiting the apartment, I walked towards the parking lot.

And.

There were two people on the side of the road.

One on the right, one on the left.

In the dusk, with the sun still up, as if they were waiting for me, two people were on the sidewalk.

One was a young boy with droopy eyes. With long legs and a thin waist, it was a stature that looked balanced and agile. He was wearing green work clothes, as if he had just come home from a part-time job. Letting his black bangs hang and with both hands in his pockets, he was smoking a cigarette.

And the other one was a girl with a bowl cut.

A pure white dress and even whiter skin. Only her lips were strangely red. With an awfully cold gaze, as if looking down on someone, she was glaring at me.

"Moeta-kun... Houko-chan."

Ishigami Moeta and Yamiguchi Houko.

Having deserted the *Killing Names*,

They were now residents of the rundown apartment.

So they still haven't headed towards the school ruins.

Vigilance.

Naturally, my legs stopped.

My chest throbbed.

My wound ached.

The heavy silence weighed on me.

"You don't need to worry, Ii-nii."

Moeta-kun said with a beautiful voice that softened the mood.

"Houko will not raise her hands against you anymore because you formed a loyalty contract. She can't touch you, and she has no say in what you do."

"Loyalty.....?"

"The *Yamiguchi* are extremely specialized assassins that can only use their killing abilities for their master's sake. They can't move without making a contract with someone."

Ah, come to think of it, Izumu-kun told me something like that. And as I recall, when I was stabbed by Houko-chan, she said something like that while she was holding my head in her arms.

I see, so that was something necessary for Houko-chan to *move*.

Needing a *master* to exert their *power*.

A loyalty contract.

Only for someone's sake.

They can only exert their power for someone else's sake.

"For Houko-chan, it must have been unexpected for you to regain consciousness so quickly, but while Ii-nii was unconscious, she could move freely without being restrained by you."

"I lacked awareness," Houko-chan mumbled in a disgusted voice as if she was clicking her tongue. "I should've shown no mercy and aimed at a vital spot."

".....No, it seems it was a lethal wound."

"I should've aimed for the heart."

“I would’ve died.”

The stabbing, was it necessary?

At least, for Houko-chan.

Scary.....

I wonder if that was not only to *stop* me, but also to break the shackles that would inevitably bind her, even if only while I was in the hospital.

Using such ridiculous subterfuge all of a sudden.....

To me, who didn’t know the circumstances, it was an act impossible to understand.

“Anyway,” Moeta-kun said. “It was Houko-chan’s mistake to have made a loyalty contract that involves her whole life with someone close. She also misjudged Ii-nii’s toughness and now she can’t stop you from acting.”

“Can not.....”

“Total submission.”

“Submission.....”

I looked at Houko-chan.

Houko-chan glared at me with a “Tch.”

Total submission.....

It somehow made my heart pound.

“Houko-chan.”

“.....Yes. What is it, Onii-chan.”

“Say woof.”

“.....”

Houko-chan shivered for a moment and then, with her usual expression, as if it wasn’t anything special,

“.....woof.”

She said.

Her cool expression was only on the exterior, though.

Her body was trembling with embarrassment.

She bit her lips and tears appeared in her eyes.

.....Somehow, I felt like I was finished as a person.

Human Failure, Nonsense User.

It’s not like she obeys me with enthusiasm.....

“Fufu.”

Moeta-kun chuckled as if he was enjoying himself.

It seems he was angry.

"Anyway, that's why if Ii-ni wants to go somewhere, she can't stop you. The only thing Houko can do is help you with all her might to ensure that you stay safe and unharmed"

".....What about you?"

I asked.

"Moeta-kun, you don't have any such restraints, do you? After all, you're a *Grim Reaper*. Also, you shouldn't have waited for me here, you could have gone in advance by yourself."

"Neither I nor Houko know the location of Sumiyuri Academy," Moeta-kun said nonchalantly. "We need you to guide us there and, of course, we have no means of transportation. A fifteen year old and a thirteen year old have no means of getting around. Being a kid is impractical. Ah, we're troubled, troubled."

"About that....."

You could've done something about that.

If it's you two, you could've done something.

Houko-chan, looking very displeased, changed the target of her glaring to Moeta-kun and said, "Moeta said we should wait for Onii-chan until the last moment."

"Even though I said it's dangerous. Moeta, if Onii-chan gets more hurt than now, what will you do?"

"....."

If I may calmly interject, the danger of what Houko-chan did to me was first class, surpassing any experience that I've ever had, but, well, this wasn't the kind of atmosphere where I could say that.

"Houko, you know..."

Moeta-kun smiled broadly.

His personality seems to be quite bad.

Even if they were only half-siblings, he was a boy beautiful enough to make one's blood freeze, but unlike Houko-chan, Moeta-kun already had a certain kind of narrow-mindedness about him that didn't inspire desire for protection.

"I like Ii-nii and Mii-nee from the bottom of my heart. I love them."

"Then–"

"Houko and I have different ways of loving things. Houko values the things that she loves, but I can only love the things that I value. That's something we talked a lot about yesterday, didn't we?"

"....."

“I won the bet. I’m the one that believed Ii-nii would come back. No, I knew it,” Moeta-kun said as if inviting me. “I’ve been waiting impatiently for you, Ii-nii.”

“.....Thanks for waiting.”

“Of course, after all of this,” Houko-chan turned and looked at me with half desperate eyes. “‘I’m going alone, don’t follow me,’ you won’t say something like that, right?”

“You’re doing this for Miiko-san, right?”

I.

I took one step forward with my feet that had come to a stop.

I moved to pass between them.

“If it’s not for me, do as you like.”

I advanced without looking back.

But those footsteps.

“...As you wish.”

One.

“I intended to do that from the beginning.”

Two overlapped.

Without exchanging words,

Without even confirming with each other,

Keeping the same pace, we walked.

Yamiguchi Houko.

Ishinagi Moeta.

And the Nonsense User.

The three of us are aligned, huh.

No, one more.

It’s about time.

Even that late entering person.

Won’t miss this timing.

Now should be the limit.

I swear, they’re teasing me.

But if they’re going to show up, this is the only time to do it.

If they miss, then they’re not that person to begin with.

Turning the corner, we arrived at the parking lot.

In the untaken space between Miiko-san's Fiat 500 and my Vespa, a vintage model, where I was stabbed in the chest the day before yesterday, it was parked.

A dazzlingly bright red and streamlined form.

A stylish convertible.

"....."

"....."

"....."

No one said anything.

Without looking between us, instinctively, we advanced towards that convertible.

I went around the right side and took the passenger seat.

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun took the back seats.

We got in and closed the door.

The engine was still on.

With a glance, I checked the driver's seat.

I didn't need to confirm, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

Neat red hair reaching her shoulders. A wine red suit, with the shirt around her chest. A short skirt and comically long legs that wouldn't fit without moving the seat back. She had an appearance that could only be described as beautiful, but she emitted a dangerous charm, with deep red sunglasses that made it impossible to see her eyes.

Just being there made me feel overpowered.

An absolute feeling of intimidation.

That presence.

"Dear client, where to?"

Saying that, she smiled cynically.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

It was Aikawa Jun's arrival.

Trying to look cool, I answered her.

"With you, anywhere we can."

AIKAWA JUN
RED

ACT 7 – DECLARATION OF WAR

0

Creation before destruction.
Burial before collapse.
Faith on the right, balance on the left.
Charade in light, foundation in shadow.
Grief for someone else,
Hatred for them.

1

"Fufun. I see. So in other words, that bastard, Kino Raichi, is like Purple Haze, right?"

"No, you don't need to express it with Stands....."

Is that so easy to understand?

Aikawa-san went full speed from the get go.

From the passenger's seat, I was explaining to Aikawa-san, who was in the driver's seat, what had happened so far, but she didn't seem too surprised.

".....Are you by chance already aware of the current situation?"

"Mm. I heard the gist of it from Kouta."

"Kouta-san, huh....."

But I hadn't told anything to Kouta-san.

Though that person is ill natured, so she must have deduced that I knew something from when we talked in the hospital room and when I stopped her at the last moment, so it's no surprise that she investigated my surroundings.

That being said.

I see, Kouta-san kept her promise.

"Ahaha. But I didn't know she loved me that much."

"I had noticed, though."

"You're perceptive when it comes to others, Ii-tan. Hey, Houko-chan, don't you think so too?"

Aikawa-san turned around to the back seats (even though she was driving). Even Houko-chan wasn't brazen enough to fall asleep under these circumstances even though she was in a vehicle. Sitting right behind Aikawa-san, she looked surprised when suddenly called out to.

"Yes."

She answered.

They heard about her a few times from me, but now that I think about it, this is the first time they've met Aikawa-san. Of course, when I spoke, I didn't know of their lineage, but for Houko-chan and Moeta-kun who are *Killing Names*, *Humanity's Strongest Contractor*, the *Death Colored Crimson*, Aikawa Jun should be an existence that holds a great meaning (that was even the case for Izumu-kun).

Even then, Moeta-kun seemed awfully carefree and was enjoying the air in the open car, well, that's probably a problem with his personality, but Houko-chan seemed a little tense. She already introduced herself, but it doesn't seem like she broke the ice at all and, of course, Aikawa-san doesn't care about such things.

"It's a real disaster that Houko-chan chose such a thick headed man as her master."

"Yes. Exactly as you say."

"How about it? Won't you switch to me now? It'd be better if the person you serve is cool, right?"

"No. No matter how half assed, thickheaded, and unsociable a person Onii-chan is, it's not something I can do anything about on my own."

"....."

I thought about having her say woof one more time.

It was a dangerous and sweet temptation.

Even though they're both girls younger than me, unlike Hime-chan, Houko-chan has been beating me up until now.....

Well, neither Houko-chan nor Moeta-kun seemed to be hostile to Aikawa Jun, unlike Izumu-kun, so that was good. I didn't want to have my pace disturbed now.

"If Aikawa Jun is on our side..."

Moeta-kun joined the conversation.

"...It already feels like an easy win. At this rate, it looks like I'll be able to do it easily. I still have part-time work tomorrow, so I welcome having as much spare energy as possible."

Umm.....

That was someone who had never done something with Aikawa-san speaking. It's true that working together with her makes things a piece of cake, but it's safe to assume that your exhaustion level will increase by a factor of three or four. It's inevitable that you'll not have a shred of energy left.

It's a card too dangerous to use freely.

Too sharp to be a trump card.

I can't say that in this case, though.

"But Sumiyuri Academy, huh. I thought I'd never go back there again. It's quite twisted to use that place as your headquarters, I swear..."

"....."

"...That shitty father."

After sighing, Aikawa-san laughed it off.

"I finally found him."

"Found him, you say..."

So then does this mean that for a little over a month, Aikawa-san has been searching for her father, that fox-masked man, all this time? Is that why she disappeared and couldn't be found?

"After asking Izumu-kun about the fox-masked man, Aikawa-san..."

"It's Jun. Don't call me by my last name. Though, that being said, it feels like it's been a long time since we last did this bit. Okay, go on."

".....So, Jun-san, ever since then, you've been searching for that fox-masked man?"

"No, I've been looking for that asshole for a long time. The fox-masked man, that's the first time I've ever heard that fancy name. And no matter how much I searched, I couldn't find him. To think that he would disguise himself."

"Eh....."

A disguise, does she mean that mask?

.....No way, right.....?

"Well, I half expected it, but you two don't seem to be as close as a parent and child."

Because ten years ago.

Considering what Saitou Takashi probably did during his second trip to America, the answer is obvious. It's easy to imagine that they wouldn't be so intimate.

"You know, Ii-tan, he was..."

Aikawa-san said.

"...The worst."

"....."

"If you've already heard, I'm going to repeat it, but I have three fathers. No, I had three. Even though one went down, then two, then three, one was left."

"If I remember correctly, all three of them..."

"Yeah. **I killed them**."

For being a confession of murder, of parricide, it was too light.

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun didn't react.

Of course.

These siblings have thrown away their parents.

"What happened ten years ago, it's not a past I've often disclosed. At that time, I wasn't yet the strongest and of course I wasn't a contractor. I was just a tool for those three."

"A tool... not a daughter?"

"A daughter and a tool," Aikawa-san said cynically. "Well, even then, what I do hasn't changed much since then. Taking a lot of jobs under the will of that asshole of a father."

"....."

"It pissed me off, so I killed all three of them. Well, that's about it, that's the connection between me and him."

It's not something that simple, is it?

It's not something that can be settled with such simple words.

I know it.

I **know it very well**.

".....You're not his real daughter?"

"I'm not. Our ages wouldn't match, right?"

"I don't necessarily think they wouldn't match."

Saitou Takashi is currently thirty nine years old.

Aikawa-san is probably in her twenties.

It shouldn't be impossible.

"Your faces look somewhat alike, too."

For her to just be an orphan or a foundling is impossible.

As a setting, it's impossible.

"Of course they do."

Aikawa-san said.

"Because I'm the daughter of his big sister."

".....Sister?"

If I remember correctly, Takashi Saitou.

He had two twin sisters, right?

The two sisters who went missing.

"Though it's not clear which of the sisters it was. That's why that asshole picked me up. He's a horrible siscon bastard."

"So that's the circumstances."

Though I say that's the circumstances, it's probably not just that. I'm sure that ten years ago, and even ten years before that, there must have been a long and rich story about Saitou Takashi and his surroundings and Aikawa Jun and her surroundings that can't be told in the middle of a trip like this.

The story will probably never be told.

It's not my place to hear it.

I can't go that far.

After all, it's a family matter.

"I knew he wasn't the kind of guy who'd drop dead that easily and it's as I thought. I thought he was living somewhere from the start, but I was surprised to see the Niounomiya siblings under his control. Though, that's typical of him."

"....."

It's just.

Some worries still remained.

Worries. Now that Aikawa Jun has finally found her father, how will she act? Against her father, will she be able to be like with everyone else, will she be the strongest?

It's someone that she's already killed before.

It's a complicated issue.

"It's thanks to Ii-tan."

"Eh?"

"That I can meet my father."

".....Why?"

"If it weren't for Ii-tan, I probably would never have met him. Because ten years ago, I completely severed the connection between us. Ii-tan's talent of gathering weirdos came in handy in an unexpected way."

".....Thanks for that, I'm glad to be of use for you."

"I've moved around a lot in the past month, I've been to America, I've traveled halfway around the world, but in the end, being with Ii-tan was the best thing for me. I thought being found by Kouta was a good opportunity, so I came back."

"But why did you go into hiding? If you wanted to look for him, there were other ways to do it, right? Like relying on Kunagisa or relying on *Chii-kun*. Or keeping a watch on me from the beginning."

"I couldn't tell all that just from what Izumu said. If I knew that you had been *nominated* by that asshole, I would've just kept an eye on you right from the start."

“.....Right.”

We travelled single-mindedly on the highway.

Since we were basically going away from the center of the town, the highway was virtually empty. Seeing the break in the conversation, Moeta-kun interjected with a “but” from the back.

“Are you sure it’s going to be okay, Jun-san?”

“Hmm? What is it, pretty boy?”

“I certainly welcome the easygoing mood, but the way you’re talking about it makes me a little nervous. You, Aikawa Jun-san...”

I turned back and looked at Moeta-kun.

He was smiling broadly and seemed to be enjoying himself.

Certainly, he seemed a bit uneasy.

“...**You just want to see your dad, don’t you**?”

“.....”

“The causality that fell apart, the link that was severed. If you’ve been in hiding for the past month in the interest of reconnecting with him, then I’m truly sorry, but I’m going to have to go off on my own without you. I don’t want to be held back.”

“...You’re quite unreserved with your words against this strongest contractor, pretty boy,” Aikawa-san said as if she was truly having fun from the bottom of her heart. “Aren’t you tired of using that kind of language at your age? If you’re annoyed with me, you can just speak casually.”

“That’s just how I am.”

“Is that your wisdom?”

“Something like that,” Moeta-kun nodded. “Houko-chan and I don’t have any words concerning our father. That’s why, for that reason, you and I are incompatible. And in the first place, I’m not interested in that fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi or whatever. I don’t care about him. The one I’m interested in is only the man Ii-nii talked about earlier, Kino Raichi. He’s probably the one holding the antidote.”

“.....”

“If you’re a contractor, I’d prefer it if you don’t put your personal feelings into it. What I’m trying to say is that’s the source of my unease.”

“Huh.” Aikawa-san burst out in laughter. “I know. Do I look like the kind of fool who’d put personal matters in her work?”

No.....

I think you’ve been constantly putting them in so far.....

“The reason I was searching for that shitty father, pretty boy...”

Aikawa-san said.

"Is because this time I'll kill him for good."

"....."

"Don't worry, the mood of an easy victory won't waver, pretty boy. In this world, and even in other worlds, there's been plenty of people other than him that've been called the worst, but the only one called the strongest is me, Aikawa Jun."

Moeta-kun.

Hearing that, he shrugged.

".....It was an impolite question. Please forget it."

"Thanks."

As the one in between them, I felt a little anxious, but Aikawa-san didn't seem to mind it that much. Well, if I were to make an unnecessary retort, the frequency at which the strongest and the worst are used in idioms is completely different, so I think that using that for a comparison is fundamentally wrong, but I won't say such tactless things.

"Ah, but, Aikawa-san."

"Jun."

".....Jun-san, about the *Thirteen Stairs*, the name of one of Jun-san's other fathers, Kajou Akira, was in there too."

"Huuh?"

Aikawa-san looked surprised.

I explained to Aikawa-san in detail about each of the *Thirteen Stairs* that I had failed to mention earlier. Of course, clearly enough so that the two in the back could also understand. Though this would be the second time I'm telling it to Houko-chan and of course Moeta-kun probably heard about it from her, but still, just in case.

"The *Thirteen Stairs*, huh. Be it the Phantom Troupe or the GUNG-HO-GUNS, I don't know what he respects, but there's too many weirdos among the members." After hearing everything, Aikawa-san made a bitter smile. "That guy, he's still the same in that area. Of course, because he's still pursuing the same goal....."

The goal he's pursuing. The goal he's chasing.

The end of the world.

The end of the Story.

“But Ii-tan, you don’t need to worry about Kajou Akira. He’s dead for sure.”

“Dead……”

“I can assure that, concerning him.”

“You killed him, right?”

Killed.

Murder.

Killed someone.

Killed someone killed someone killed someone.

…Calm down.

Accept it.

It’s something from long ago.

It’s not something that should shake me.

“No…” But then, Aikawa-san muttered something. “…To be precise, the one who killed him was my other father, Aikawa Junya, but, well, I was the one who killed him about halfway and I also confirmed it. Of course, it’s not something that Izumu-kun would know, but I’m a related party. I couldn’t be any more related, so I can assert that. Kajou Akira is dead.”

“But in the *Thirteen Stairs*.”

“It’s probably what’s called a retired number.”

Aikawa-san said sarcastically.

“Kajou Akira was the only existence that couldn’t be replaced for that asshole. Even more than his best friend Aikawa Junya, Kajou Akira was the one and only to him.”

“……”

Hmm. I was still only halfway convinced.

I felt faintly uncomfortable.

Aikawa-san has three fathers.

That’s what I heard from Hikari-san.

And the person in question admitted that too.

So you can see that as an objective fact, but so far Aikawa-san has only called the fox-masked man *father*. She hasn’t shown any sign of this for the other two. In reality, she only calls her *uncle* with whom she shares a real blood relationship her dad. That’s probably because he’s the closest existence to her in terms of blood, but she doesn’t even show such treatment towards Aikawa Junya from whom she inherited her name. Isn’t there something off about that?

Honestly, I felt Moeta-kun’s worry too.

Hypothetically.

Hypothetically, if there was a possibility that **the strongest and the worst would open their hearts to each other**, that really would be too much to handle, wouldn't it?

Aikawa-san, she's been searching for Saitou Takashi for the past month. Not just this past month, she's been looking for a long time. Probably since right after she killed him ten years ago, she's been searching for him.

If that's the case.

If she has some feelings like that.

It's enough to make me feel some worry.

Aikawa-san.

I wonder if my fears are getting through to her.

"Basically, Ii-tan, ten years ago my three fathers had a falling out."

"Huh..."

"My shitty father and I had a fight and Aikawa Junya became my ally. Kajou Akira sided with Saitou Takashi, so it became a two versus two family fight."

"And..."

"I was the only survivor." As if she was reminiscing about those days, Aikawa-san had a nostalgic expression. "At that time, I was also listed as dead as a matter of fact. I didn't have a name back then, so I took Aikawa Junya's name."

"So that's why?"

That's why she hates being called by her last name?

I thought it was just a weird habit, so I called her by her last name just for the fun of it, but I see, having heard that, it made sense.

"You, so you really were doing it on purpose....."

Aikawa-san's voice had an intense gravity.

It seems she read my mind.

"Well, setting that aside."

I forcefully change the subject.

"You didn't have a name?"

"It's not that I didn't have one. I was called a lot of things by a lot of people. Most of the aliases they call me now are just remnants of that time. Each of them has no style to them, so I don't like them, but I was called Eagle the most."

"Eagle?"

"Because Aikawa Junya was Hawk."

“Oh, an eagle and a hawk.

“In this case, we’re both hawks,” Aikawa-san said. “I learned how to fight from Aikawa Junya.”

“.....”

“Well, Aikawa Junya was the one who did the most father-like things for me. He always stood by my side in the end.”

Even while saying that.

She won’t call that person father?

Or maybe that’s just how it is.

Or maybe that’s not how it is.

Someone else’s family.

It’s not something I can comment on.

“Are you bad with people without names?”

“.....No, even if it’s just an alias, it’s fine. When you get right down to it, names are just symbols. It’s just that, you know, symbols for the sake of symbols that aren’t expected to be called by anyone from the start are my weakness. A symbol without meaning is still fine, but if it has no meaning as a symbol, then it’s honestly tough. It’s just like noise.”

“.....”

“Words don’t get through.”

Well, it can’t be helped.

It’s natural for the other side to have that degree of countermeasures.

Rather, thinking about the current situation, I should see it as an advantage that one of the steps of the *Thirteen Stairs* was filled just to face me.

I’m not alone now

Yamiguchi Houko.

Ishinagi Moeta.

Aikawa Jun.

I have three reliable allies.

The *Thirteen Stairs* are no match.

“Hmm. But it bothers me that there are only twelve steps in the *Thirteen Stairs*. Isn’t there some kind of secret number? That shitty dad always likes to hide the important things.”

“I don’t see the point in hiding it, though.”

“Well, that’s true. If that thirteenth person was **me**, it’d be a bit surprising.”

“Could it unexpectedly be a seat left for you?” Moeta-kun said. “Regardless of what you think, there might still be some lingering attachment on your father’s side.”

“That’s impossible.”

Aikawa-san said.

“That asshole doesn’t think anything about me.”

“……”

“At any rate, he probably doesn’t even think that I’ll come. No, even if he did, it’d probably be the same.”

“…….Aikawa-san.”

“Next time you call me that, I’ll drop you on the highway.”

“……”

Now that she knows I’m doing it on purpose, she’s capable of anything.

While we were busy talking, we arrived at a familiar location. Well, that means that we’ve finally reached the halfway point to Sumiyuri Academy.

“By the way, I have a question not for you, but for the two in the back. How many of the names in the *Thirteen Stairs* are familiar to you? Honestly, I’m not that well informed about that world, so I don’t know that many.”

“I don’t know much either. Though I’m a *Grim Reaper*, I haven’t crossed a certain line,” Moeta-kun answered. “However, Houko knows one, right?”

“…….Yes,” Houko-chan nodded. “Yamiguchi Nureginu. Though, I’ve never seen him in person. Even in the *Yamiguchi*, no one has ever seen Nureginu-san’s appearance. Therefore, I can’t give any advice.”

“Is that so,” Aikawa-san didn’t show any dejection even after hearing that. “So in the end, that interference bastard, Noise, and Kino Raichi are the only two we know about clearly. There’s also the matter of the identity of that fox-masked person in the yukata, but we’ll just have to go with a haphazard approach.”

“I guess,” said Moeta-kun.

“I think so,” said Houko-chan.

“Hmm. So if you remove Kajou Akira as well, there’s only eleven people left in *Thirteen Stairs*, huh. Since there’s four of us, let’s see… I’ll take care of nine.”

Aikawa-san said.

“So, pretty boy and pretty girl, you take one each.”

“……”

“……”

“Hmm? If you want, I don’t mind taking care of all of them myself.”

"No, that should be fine," Moeta-kun said. "Then my quota will be one person. If possible, I would prefer to be the one in charge of Kino Raichi, but I won't be too selfish. Houko too, are you fine with this?"

".....I'll only follow the will of Nonsense User Onii-chan," Houko-chan said. "If Onii-chan is fine with it, I don't mind."

"No, Houko-chan, even if you say that... uh... if there are eleven and you do one each..." Having the discussion swung to me, I counted on my fingers. ".....Huh? Um, Jun-san, then what should I do?"

"You're in charge of my shitty dad, of course."

Aikawa-san said, as if it were truly obvious.

"I hate to say it, but I'm not on his radar. Don't worry, that old bastard doesn't have any fighting skills. For you who did some martial arts, it should be a breeze."

"However..." Aikawa-san continued.

"If you can, save some for me."

".....I'll try," nodding, I turned back to Houko-chan. "Then, Houko-chan, can I ask you to do that?"

"Understood," Houko-chan nodded. "As you wish, Onii-chan."

"....."

It kinda feels too formal.

It's probably a necessary ceremony for the *Yamiguchi*, but for myself, who was one-sidedly and quite harshly forced into a contract with her, I felt like I couldn't calm down in the current situation. Also, even if she said that she chose a nearby person because she didn't have the time, speaking seriously, I felt sorry for Houko-chan for making such a big contract with me. I wonder if there's something I could do.....

Well, it's not something to think about right now.

"That being said, it looks like there's almost no combat oriented people in the *Thirteen Stairs*. Houko-chan's relative, Yamiguchi Nureginu, Miotsukushi Takami, and Miotsukushi Misora. For now, it's just those three and also Kino Raichi, I guess. For that samurai girl Asano, it took some time for the symptoms to take effect, but naturally he also possesses some fast acting poison too. Also, you should be careful of Tokinomiya."

"The Thought Manipulator, was it?"

"Yes. To be honest, because of some circumstances, I know a bit about those Tokinomiya guys. Well, they were harmless, so I let them be, but they're not the people you want to get involved with willingly. They're part of the *Cursing Names* just like Kino."

“.....Yeah.”

I absolutely agree.

“Well, as far as Tokinomiya is concerned, as long as you keep your mind solid, you’ll be fine. Since their *ability* is one that takes advantage of the weakness in a person’s heart, their fear, as long as you don’t feel fear, they can’t use their *thought manipulation*.”

“Then...”

Aikawa-san should have no problem. Moeta-kun and Houko-chan too, well, they should be fine. I’ve never heard those two describe something as *scary* before.

So is the problem with me then?

There’s a bit of that.

Honestly.

There’s a part of me that’s terrified of the fox-masked man.

I’ve never felt as terrified of something as I am of that man.

Even though he hasn’t done anything to me yet.

He’s scary anyway.

“But you could take it the other way. These *Killing Names* and *Cursing Names* are fine as long as you’re on the lookout for them and although there’s a difference between combatants and non-combatants, they’re basically countermeasures against the enemy, but the problem is the rest of them, the ones **we don’t understand**. The fact that we don’t know about them might make them even worse,” Aikawa-san said. “So... Space Creator, Imaginary Weapon, Doctor, Swordsmith, Puppeteer, and Dissonance, huh.”

“Right.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Right.”

“Well, I don’t think we have to worry about the doctor and the swordsmith. We’ve got a good idea of what they can do. I can imagine what their roles are. As for the puppeteer, well, I’m not so sure. I don’t think he’s just a puppet user, but if I were to have a guess, the problem would be the space creator and the imaginary weapon.”

“Since their identities are unknown.”

“I wonder if we can compare the space creator to Man In The Mirror.”

“I don’t think we can.”

“.....So we just have to do it unplanned, huh.” Aikawa-san glanced at me and then looked at the two in the back. “Well then, prepare your guts, youngins.”

"Houko and I are *combat focused*," Moeta-kun said. "This kind of situation is our speciality. The question will be how well we can make up for our lack of experience with our talents, but, well, I'll try to do my best to the point where I won't get tired."

"....."

Houko-chan was silent.

Umm... I'm still worried. Unlike Moeta-kun, Houko-chan acts cool, but she has a habit of doing her best until she collapses.

Thirteen years old.

Thinking about Shiogi-chan, Tamamo-chan, and Hime-chan, I think it's an age where one can fight sufficiently. If we're bound by common sense, we won't get anywhere.

If possible, I'd like to do this without anyone getting injured.

On our side, of course.

But also on their side.

I don't want anyone to get hurt.

And more importantly, I don't want anyone to die.

Even if it's unreasonable.

If even one person dies.

I won't be able to face Miiko-san.

If someone were to get hurt for her sake in any shape or form, she probably won't accept it.

Whatever life it was.

She'd probably be deeply saddened.

I don't want to make her carry a cross like that.

If possible, I'd like to finish this without her knowing.

If you think that's hypocrisy, then it probably is.

However, if that is a sin, I will accept any punishment.

I won't change my mind about that.

As if it were a belief.

As if it were a creed.

I won't change my ways.

The only person who needs to get hurt is me.

I want to finish this without anyone else getting hurt.

But if Miiko-san doesn't want for me to get hurt, if it's like on that day when she protected me from Kino-san, if she wishes for that.

Then just this once, I'll stop getting hurt too.

We got off the highway.

From here, it should be a private road.

So it's about time.

Since the Sumiyuri Academy itself had already ceased operations, the road was deserted and there was not a single light. It was already *night*, so it was quite dangerous, but Aikawa-san didn't slow down even though we were off the highway.

Rather, she accelerated.

Is she in a hurry?

Because of her father.

"……."

"Ah, right, right, Ii-tan."

However, with an easygoing voice that had nothing to say, Aikawa-san spoke to me.

"You probably didn't notice, so Onee-san will teach you one thing."

"What?"

"I will t e l l y o u ★"

"No, even if you say it in an erotic way….."

"It's about Hikari."

"What about Hikari-san?"

"It's probably not Hikari."

"What?"

I was surprised.

"I haven't seen her directly, so I can't say for certain, but I think it was probably either Akari or Teruko. I think it was Teruko."

"Eh……?"

Because they are triplets.

That kind of switching is entirely possible.

The difference between those three is the glasses and their personality.

You can remove glasses and you can play another person's character.

But.

"How can you say that? As you said, Jun-san, you didn't even see her, right?"

"Yeah. But I wouldn't be able to tell in person anyway. Because they're triplets. And as for their character, those three sisters are liars in the truest sense of the word."

"I know that too, but."

“Ii-tan can’t even see it. I can’t even see it. Of course, even those three’s master, Iria, can’t tell the difference between each one of them. So far, there’s only one person who can tell the three apart just by looking at them.”

“.....Ah.”

Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa Tomo... on that island, with one look, with just one glance, she could clearly distinguish between the three of them. With Kunagisa’s terrific memory and recognition ability, she could tell the differences even if they were identical.

And.

That day when I met the fox-masked man in the underground parking lot, Hikari-san didn’t try to meet Kunagisa even though she was so close to her.

That’s because.

Hikari-san wasn’t Hikari-san?

“But if that’s true, then why? There’s no reason to lie like that, is there?”

“Yeah. Thinking normally, that kind of lie is unnecessary. But that’s why. If she wasn’t Hikari but Akari or Teruko, then it’s probably Teruko. That’s what I think. You said that Hikari-san was following you around, right? In other words, wasn’t she guarding you?”

I.

Without thinking, I looked back at Houko-chan.

Certainly, that was also the case for Houko-chan.

To protect me.

And in the first place, even though she’s a maid, she has a seperate role from her two sisters. A bodyguard. A remarkable bodyguard that guards Akagami Iria’s surroundings.

“Kasugai went to that island and told her about you, didn’t she? Hearing that, even though it’s unfitting for her, Iria became worried, right? If that fortune teller who didn’t look like she could die was killed and that made her think that something fishy was going on around Ii-tan, it wouldn’t be surprising if she wanted to do something for you.”

“.....”

“You’re making a face like that was unnecessary.”

“No, but if that was the case, they could have said so from the beginning–”

“–If they had told you from the start, you would have refused. That’s why you’re making that face like it was unnecessary. Right, Houko-chan?”

“.....Right. Certainly,” Houko-chan nodded in response to Aikawa-san’s question. “That’s why I didn’t say anything about it either.”

“.....”

I had no choice but to go silent.

“Actually, I think Houko-chan’s and Teruko’s guard was rather useful. After meeting Kino Raichi and being discharged, the only time that shitty dad was able to contact you was in Kunagisa’s apartment, right? When Teruko couldn’t possibly come along and Houko-chan was sleeping. Aside from that brief window, it was a solid guard, right? Like the strongest shield.”

“.....”

“Well, that bastard is impressive for not letting that tiny gap slip away.”

In the end, I’ve never, not even once lived alone.....? Even though I said that it was unnecessary, that they shouldn’t get involved, I might not have been able to live without that extra care.

Though it’s different from gratitude.

There were some points to think about.

“Though it’s a half baked theory close to slander and, in reality, Hikari may have really just been Hikari. But it’s interesting to think of it that way.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

“Fufufu. The thought of that quiet and unfriendly Teruko-chan calling Ii-tan master and maintaining a smile while doing something like that even while hating it from the bottom of her heart makes Onee-chan a bit aroused.”

“.....”

I’ve had an inkling about this for a while now, but.....

This person is quite into women.

She might surprisingly get along with Suzunashi-san.

“Ii-nii.”

I was called from behind.

It was Moeta-kun.

“Is that Sumiyuri Academy?”

“.....Yeah.”

Moeta-kun didn’t even have to say it, we reached the point where we could see Sumiyuri Academy. Aside from the fact that it was quite massive, it wasn’t that different from a normal school as far as the outside was concerned. It’ll take some time before we get there, but finally.

There was no turning back.

Retreat had been out of the question for a while now.

And.

I didn't even feel like retreating.

Withdrawal was impossible.

"……Hmm."

Ah.

Then I realized.

I realized something rather important.

Right, that's right, why didn't I think of that earlier?

Aikawa Jun.

It's Aikawa Jun.

It's not just the fox-masked man that I saw that day at Kunagisa's apartment, I also met another person. The woman without a name, the woman who wasn't anyone. I had met her.

Her.

At that time, what did she say?

She said she will become Aikawa Jun.

Next, she will replace Aikawa Jun.

"……"

Impossible……

This Aikawa-san… is she a fake?

Setting aside her thoughts and mannerisms, it's not possible to trace her shape and form. That's why she had to kill Sonoyama Akane on that island. So it shouldn't be hard to tell just by looking at her……

However, if there is that one in a million chance.

Because of the subject of Hikari-san and Teruko-san earlier, it's hard to laugh away these suspicions.

Is there any way to check?

In this case, casually quizzing her about something that only Aikawa-san and I would know would be the clearest way, but if it's her, I'm sure she would've done that much research.

I'm in a bind……

I know that it's not true, that it's not possible, but once you have your doubts, it becomes awkward. Such doubts will echo later on.

"Hey, Ii-tan."

Being called by Aikawa-san, I looked up in a hurry.

While I was thinking about such things, we'd already arrived at Sumiyuri Academy. We'd crossed the last line. The light from the headlights stretched far out and illuminated the school entrance.

The gate of that entrance was closed.

An iron door.
A huge, mighty-looking, iron door.
As if overlapping with that door, there was one figure.
A familiar standing figure.
It was Dissonance.
Noise-kun.
The light from the headlights.
You could see it from the other side.
He smiled.
Even at this distance, I understood that he smiled.
"Noise..."
I called his name.
I called his name, that wasn't his name.
The one without a name, I called him.
He was waiting for me at the school gates, just as he'd promised.
Waiting for us.
As our guide.
"Huh. I see, so that's Noise. The eleventh step of the Thirteen Stairs, huh. He looks pretty cute."
Saying that, Aikawa-san narrowed her eyes, confirming Noise-kun's appearance and position and...
Stepped on the gas pedal.
Accelerating even more.
Accelerating, Accelerating, Accelerating.
And arrived at the Academy's entrance in a blink.
Arrived and...

Crashed into it.

A roar.
A roar that made my body tremble.
Without slowing down at all, without stepping on the brakes the whole time, letting the momentum carry us through the iron door that seemed so sturdy, we crashed right into it.
Fragments of the shattered door flew back, grazing my cheeks, Moeta-kun's shoulders, and Houko-chan's head.
The entire car entered into the Academy and at that point, Aikawa-san finally pulled on the handle brake. Making a beautiful round drift as if

drawing a picture, the car did a 180° turn and faced the entrance from where we entered just a second ago, just destroying it rather than intruding through it.

Looking up at the sky.

Noise-kun was, along with a scream, flying through the air.

The flight duration exceeded five second.

And then, the landing.

Rather than a landing, it was just a fall, no.

A crash.

Squash. There was a horrible sound.

An awfully horrible sound.

"……Ouch……."

Even though I was wearing a seatbelt, it was too sudden for my body to handle the impact. It looked like it was the same even for Moeta-kun and Houko-chan who were in the back seats. Both of them had their posture broken.

Or rather.

Amazed.

Dumbfounded.

A voice couldn't be heard.

The three of us were completely speechless.

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun too.

This person…..

The things she does.

Even though this school was already in ruins, it's still not a good idea to destroy it out of the blue. It was too flashy to call it a surprise attack or even a preemptive strike. No matter how you looked at it, it was too much.

"Woo, we arrived!"

One person.

Aikawa-san was the only one who looked lively and unconcerned. She took off her seatbelt, got out of the car, and jogged towards Noise-kun, who had been blasted quite far.

And she checked his consciousness.

However…..

She didn't need to get that close to confirm it. Even from this distance, it was obvious. He seemed to be convulsing and his eyes clearly turned white. No matter how you looked at it, he had retired.

Dissonance.

Dissonance had quickly disappeared.
Hah, it was too fast.....
"Errrr..."
Aikawa Jun turned back.
And facing us, grandiosely spread out her arms.
"With that, I only need to take care of eight more people, right? Or was it one? Or perhaps it was thirteen....."
".....
".....
".....
"...Whatever."
Saying that, she smiled boldly.
Fearless and unrivaled.
This was the reason for why she is the strongest.
.....
I felt embarrassed for doubting her for even a second.
That's Aikawa Jun.
Without a doubt.
Another person who could do something that absurd doesn't exist.
Shouldn't I have known from the beginning?
That there can't be any fake Aikawa-san.
I should have known it.

Aikawa Jun is the real thing.

2

Though we weren't numerous, we decided to move in a formation just in case. Since I had come here with Aikawa-san three months ago and this place had some sort of connection with her, it wasn't exactly unknown territory. Even then, this place was quite different from when there were students living here and, in the first place, this academy was so complex that you can't grasp all of it just by coming here once or twice. It was like a maze or a labyrinth, there was no straightforward path. Probably the only person who could see the whole structure of the place from a bird's eye view was Shiogi-chan. Tamamo-chan and Hime-chan probably didn't even try to remember the routes.

Well, that's why we had a guide.

.....But now he's gone.

"Then I'll take the lead," said Moeta-kun. "I've been trained to detect traps and devices and since I was originally a Grim Reaper, I'm the best at sensing the location of people's souls."

"Hmm. If you say that much, I'll leave the front to the pretty boy and I'll take the back."

Said Aikawa-san.

"I'll block attacks from behind. I don't want to be getting in the way of the youngsters doing their best."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. After getting the first shot, I'm pretty satisfied with my work."

"....."

That's a problem, though.

Even though we can rely on her, if we do, our fatigue will just increase. In that sense, we can't just leave everything to Aikawa-san.

"Then Onii-chan and I will line up in the middle."

Said Houko-chan.

"So, in terms of shape, it'd be like a rhombus if you looked at it from above. Onii-chan is ambidextrous, right? Then since I'm right-handed, I'll go on the right and Onii-chan will take the left. Let's move in that formation."

"Yeah."

I said.

Rather, once the decision had been made, there was no room for my opinion.

"Then let's go."

Even though I said that, it's not like I had any idea where to go since there was no guide. I'm sure that the fox-masked man and the Thirteen Stairs are in this academy, but...

How should we search?

Even though I lost it right away, last time I had a map, but this time I didn't even have that.

"Well, in this case, there's no point in sitting still," Moeta-kun said. "They weren't very friendly to begin with, so thinking about it, we couldn't trust that guide from the start. In that sense, this situation isn't that bad."

"That's optimistic."

"In that case, it's not a good idea to be in a place with such a good view. If they have projectile weapons, we're done for. For now, let's enter the building. Even though it's like a maze, the four of us won't get lost or split up that easily."

".....Hmm."

"Ii-nii, are you worried?"

"No, well, I don't want to wait quietly for them to come and find us and I honestly appreciate Moeta-kun's and Jun-san's idea, but it's just that it's out of character for me, so I'm complaining a bit. I'm not too worried."

"Is that so. And Houko?"

"If Onii-chan isn't worried, then I'm not either," Houko-chan said. "I don't mind doing what Moeta said."

"There's one more thing I'd like to add," Aikawa-san, raising her hand. "Let's capture the next of the Thirteen Stairs that appears. There's quite a few things we'd like to ask and, if we're lucky, they might lead us to where that asshole is."

"....."

Are you really going to say that line?

For some reason, I glared at her.

She winked at me.

.....It's no good, we're of a different caliber.

"After coming all this way, there's probably no nonsense....."

Therefore.

We formed up as planned and went into the nearest building to the gate. The door wasn't locked, so there was no need to use my lock picking blade

It was dimly lit, or rather, completely dark. It seemed the place wasn't ventilated at all as the air was awfully stagnant and there was a lot of dust

here and there. It was to the point that every time we took a step, white smoke rose up from under our feet.

It seemed like they could be hidden anywhere in this place.....

There was no shortage of hiding spots.

Yeah, I remembered.

Sumiyuri Academy.

Hanging High School.

It was here that I met Hime-chan.

".....Hey, Ii-nii."

"Yes? What is it?"

"For now, I'm thinking of just going down the hallways at random, going up stairs if we find them, and then going down if we reach the end. Is that fine with you?"

"Ah, yeah. I'm counting on you. Let me know if you sense someone there. I'll be careful, but Moeta-kun is the best at that."

"Yeah. After all, I'm a Grim Reaper."

"Hey, can I ask one thing?"

"What is it?"

"What do you mean by Grim Reaper?"

Somehow, no matter how I thought about it, it ddidn't feel right to put that existence on the same plane as professional killers, assassins, or demonic killers, but Izumu-kun said something like it's fitting to call the Ishinagi grim reapers. An outsider like me doesn't really get these precise categories.

"Killing Names were originally attributed randomly, Ii-nii. What we do is the same thing as everyone."

"The same thing?"

"Killing."

Moeta-kun said simply.

Houko-chan didn't say anything.

She simply gripped my right hand with her left hand.

Just that.

"If a term is different, the only reason is because we needed to differentiate and distinguish our purposes. Do you want to hear the details?"

"We have the time, so can I ask you to do that?"

"Houko, Jun-san, are you fine with that?"

".....If Onii-chan says he's fine."

"Yeah. I've been meaning to hear the details someday."

.....No, you should know.

Really, she surprisingly knows so little.....

"First, I'd like to preface this by saying that the world can be divided into four. Namely, the Ordinary World, or rather than ordinary, the basic world. The Ordinary World gives off a common and boring image, but it's basically the most powerful one. There are various opinions, but that's what I think, at least. If I were to put it in OS terms, it would be Windows."

"No, even if you compare it to an OS....."

"Right. To make it easier, let's compare it to Stands."

"Isn't that hard to understand too.....?"

"Now, for the remaining three... Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami, Ekagami, Origami, the Four Gods and one Mirror making up the World of Financial Power. This is, well, like MacOS I guess."

"Are you gonna use that comparison until the end.....?"

"It's probably not a coincidence, but this place, the Sumiyuri Academy, has deep connections with the Origami family and Rule. Well, that doesn't really matter. Next, the World of Political Power. The Kunagisa Syndicate... right. I guess I don't need to explain this one too much in front of Ii-nii."

"Well... yeah."

Now.

What will he compare it to?

"If it were an OS, it'd be Unix."

"....."

Well, I guess that's valid.

It's about right.

"And now the last one. In this world, there is no operating system because it's the World of Violence dominated by inhuman abilities, abnormals, and atypicals."

"....."

So comparing them to OS was foreshadowing.

It was a hard to understand foreshadowing.

It was a foreshadowing that we would have been better without.

As if Moeta-kun was disappointed by everyone's lack of reaction, "so, after that," he said, quickly moving on to the next topic.

"We can divide the forces of this world into the seven Killing Names and the six Cursing Names, but the Killing Names are mainly those with killing abilities and the Cursing Names are mainly those with non-killing abilities.

Well, that's kind of self-explanatory, but those two were originally the same thing."

"Same.....?"

"The origin is the same. It's like how reptiles split into birds and mammals. Though their origin is the same, the Killing Names and Cursing Names are on bad terms. Even though they're almost the same."

He talked as if he was scorning and scoffing at them.

He probably was scorning and scoffing at them. "Now, finally, the main subject. The seven Killing Names. I say seven names, because there exist seven different Killing Names. Starting with the first in the hierarchy, there's the Niounomiya, the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe. Including the family branches, they boast the largest organization. The *Izumu-kun* you always mention comes from that famous place."

".....Izumu, huh." Aikawa-san nodded with a sense of admiration. "He was strong, that guy... Speaking about just pure strength, he may have been the strongest up 'till now."

".....Probably."

"The second in the rankings is Houko's former house, the *Yamiguchi*. They're a secluded organization with a lot of mystery. Then there's the most detested ones, the group of demonic killers, the *Zerozaki*. That demonic killer you talked about, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, comes from there, though Houko and I haven't heard about him."

"....."

"....."

Aikawa-san and I were silent for a moment.

Should I try to ask?

To Aikawa-san?

You... did you kill Zerozaki Hitoshiki?

"Please, at least throw some interjections, I feel lonely. Now, having introduced those three, unfortunately the next four are quite minor. Or rather, it's just that the first three stand out too much. The Yamiguchi, despite not showing themselves, stand out too much. They should just decide on one image. Right, Houko?"

"....."

"Even my sister doesn't react. I'm not very blessed. Well, that's fine. As for the remaining four, *Susukino, Hakamori, Tenbuki* and the one I come from,

Ishinagi, are so minor that sometimes people mistakenly call them *Cursing Names*."

"So what's the essential point, what's the difference between those seven?"

"*Niounomiya* are professional killers. *Yamiguchi* are assassins. *Zerozaki* are demonic killers. *Susukino* are cleaners, *Hakamori* are masters of slaughter, *Tenbuki* are janitors, and *Ishinagi* are grim reapers."

"....Umm."

It's the first time I've heard about the *Susukino*, the *Hakamori*, and the *Tenbuki*. However, even if you put them together, it still doesn't change the irregularity of the *Grim Reapers*.

"So what they're doing is the same."

Moeta-kun said.

"If there's something different, it's their reason."

".....Reason."

"The *Niounomiya* **will kill if hired by anyone**. Therefore, they're professional killers. The *Yamiguchi* **only kill for the sake of one particular person**. Therefore, they're assassins. The *Zerozaki* **kill without reason**. Therefore, they're demonic killers. The *Susukino* **kill for justice**. Therefore, they're cleaners. The *Hakamori* **kill for the sake of humanity**. Therefore, they're masters of slaughter. The *Tenbuki* **kill to make things clean**. Therefore, they're janitors. The *Ishinagi* **kill people who shouldn't be alive**. Therefore, they're grim reapers. That's how it is."

".....A reason to kill people, huh."

"Of course, that's a very general explanation for beginners, and there are individual characteristics that I didn't touch upon. By the way, Ii-nii. With this explanation, the *Susukino*, *Hakamori*, *Tenbuki*, and *Ishinagi* were hard to differentiate, right? But killing for justice, humanity, cleanliness, and fate is completely different."

"*Death* is *fate*?"

"Yes. For the *Ishinagi.*"

"And for Moeta-kun?"

"I already quit being a grim reaper. Ah, not exactly. I didn't stop. I couldn't become a grim reaper from the start, right."

"....."

"You want me to explain the Cursing Names too? Or are you perhaps sick and tired of talking about this?"

“No...” I answered. “.....There’s also Tokinomiya Jikoku and Kino-san. There may be some hint to beat them, so let’s hear it.”

“Yes.”

Nodded Moeta-kun.

But.

In the end, it was a topic that made my chest feel heavy.

Killer.

Demonic killer.

No matter how you say it, it’s no different, huh.

Even though Houko-chan and Moeta-kun are from the *Killing Names*, they don’t have any real combat experience, but even then, they’re able to fight here in this place.

They’re humans who can kill people.

That’s, of course, including me.

I can kill people.

Even for others. Even for myself.

I can kill.

I can destroy.

Well, it’s useless to think about it.

In the end, there’s no answer for that kind of thing.

Even if there were, that answer won’t appear.

May.

No matter how you struggle, no matter how you search, a solution that is as easy to understand and unanimously accepted as weighing a demonic killer and a murderer on the scales won’t come up.

I know that.

But is it wrong?

Is it really something that wrong?

Yearning for a clear answer.

Chasing ideals.

.....It’s probably something wrong.

I mean, at times, ideals are unsightly.

When you write them down, they’re not always beautiful, not even as an idea.

The fox-masked man’s ideals.

The *answer* he is yearning for is something primitive and final that can answer any question. That *answer* is the conclusion of the Story, something synonymous to the downfall of the world.

It's a real nuisance.

It's unnecessary.

Chasing after ideals, pursuing ideals, is certainly not a bad thing. However, even without being bad, it can become the worst.

You shouldn't forget that.

.....But, well, although things have changed a lot since then, I was reminded of the case from June after walking around for a while.

Hmmm.....

That reminds me, after we passed through this academy, I wonder what happened to the students who survived... They probably didn't all go back to normal lives and among them, there were probably a lot that considered that a normal life.

After all that, they can't go back.

They can't go back to a normal life, nor can they return to their starting point.

Well, that's.

More or less the same for everyone.

Lineage and growth.

Birth and upbringing.

Name and household.

We are all bound by it.

Even Moeta-kun and Houko-chan.

Even me.

Even Aikawa Jun.

And probably even that fox-masked man.

Twin sisters.

Missing twin sisters.

That reminds me, I never looked into the names of those sisters.....

".....Hmm?"

Huh?

That reminds me, ever since I nodded, I haven't heard the sequel of Moeta-kun's explanation on *Cursing Names*. Why is that? Did he forget?

I glanced forward.

No one was there.

"———!?"

In a panic, I turned back.

There was no one behind me either.

"Wh-wha–"

“Please calm down, Nonsense User Onii-chan.”

“--Hou……”

On my right side.

Houko-chan was there.

She existed.

Still holding my hand.

“It seems, before we noticed, we ended up encountering a *trap*.”

“*Trap*…….? Tra-trap, what–”

“Please calm down.”

“Y-you say that, but Moeta-kun and Aikawa-san suddenly disappeared–”

“Please calm down.”

“So even if you say to calm down—”

“Woof.”

“……”

I calmed down.

The effect was immediate.

“……Uh, how should I say this, umm… Houko-chan, do you feel something wrong with your body?”

“Nothing. And Onii-chan?”

“No, nothing.”

We didn’t feel like **something was done to us**.

We didn’t hear any sound and we didn’t see anything.

Even then.

Why did two people…

Why did Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun **suddenly** disappear?

Wait, I’ve experienced something similar to this before. That’s right, my first encounter with Noise-kun in the subway. In an instant, when I wasn’t focused, every passenger except Noise-kun disappeared.

Suddenly.

Then, did Noise-kun… no, no matter how you think about it, he has retired. Although he’s not dead, you could say he’s on the verge of death. At the very least, he’s not in a state where he **can do something**.

Then… no.

Ah, I see.

I heard from Izumu-kun.

“*Space Creator*…”

“……Ichirizuka Konomi?”

“Probably. So in that subway, it wasn’t Noise-kun but rather Ichirizuka Konomi’s doing. If I remember correctly, it’s a power that creates *spaces* to split up enemies and gain a geographical advantage……”

In other words.

This is what that meant.

Even though they’re an enemy, this is brilliant work.

Before we knew it, the formation we made had completely collapsed.

There’s no point in thinking about what that means. We’re in this situation now, that’s all. The only certain thing is that it’s not a cause and effect as simple as locking something by turning a key. No, maybe the mechanism really is that simple. But we, who could only see the inside of the *mechanism*, have no way to break through.

“Moeta’s story was suddenly cut off, so it shouldn’t be *Tokinomiya’s* thought manipulation. So as Onii-chan said, this is surely that *Space Creator*‘s splitting technique.”

“But… but how? How did they **carry off** Moeta-kun and Aikawa-san? There shouldn’t have been a chance for that. For those two, there’s no such thing as carelessness.”

Those two, even though they have times when they show an irresponsible personality, and in fact they really are irresponsible, they’re not foolish enough to be careless in this situation. I don’t know about this *Space Creator* or whatever, but it’s the same for the hypnosis techniques, *the thought manipulation techniques*, what is impossible to do physically is probably impossible and it’s not like they can split people who are still conscious.

Setting Moeta-kun aside, at the very least Aikawa Jun.

There’s no power that could kidnap her.

Also, maybe one, but two people?

Taking two people away without being noticed…

“No, Onii-chan,” Houko-chan turned towards the way we came and pointed down the hallway. “Do you think we were the ones to be seperated?”

“Eh?”

“Please look. There are only two sets of footprints.”

On the hallway that was covered with dust.

The footprints were clearly and distinctly left.

For two people.

Me and Houko-chan, two people.

“……As Onii-chan said, walking all this way and **not noticing** that Moeta is not in front of you is impossible. That’s why, I think we may have been the ones taken away.”

“I……”

I **was careless**.

Receiving an explanation from Moeta-kun about *Killing Names* and becoming engrossed in it. You could say I was full of mental gaps.

There was enough room for the *Space Creator*.

“Me too, though it is embarrassing, since it’s something that I know well, I removed what Moeta was saying from my mind. And regarding Aikawa-san walking behind us, I don’t think she was focused from the start…….”

“There was room.”

“There was.”

“……”

If *Space Creator* means literally what it says, it’d be easier for the person to take care of the two people in the middle rather than to divide the front and back one by one…. Maybe it was simply that he couldn’t *divide* me and Houko-chan because we were holding hands.

I took Houko-chan’s hand that I had let go in the confusion again.

“……Onii-chan?”

“It’d be bad to get split even more.”

“Ah, I see.”

“But even then… Even if it couldn’t be helped for Moeta-kun since he was looking forward, didn’t Aikawa-san, who was behind us, not notice anything? Is he that skillful, that *Space Creator*… To be honest, I think it’s way harder to do it without Aikawa-san noticing than it is without the person in question noticing.”

“……”

“What’s with that meaningful silence?”

“No, it’s just I think that person probably noticed.”

“…….What do you mean?”

“It’s just a theory. If Aikawa Jun is as the rumors say, I don’t think it’s possible for someone to get taken right in front of her while she’s conscious without her noticing.”

“But…”

Then there’s no way she would let it happen without doing anything.

She should have saved us.

“Is that so?”

“It is. Houko-chan seems to have some knowledge about her, but that person is insanely soft with her friends. If she knows they’re in danger, there’s no way she won’t save them.”

“.....And Nonsense User Onii-chan, were you saved by her as much as you say?”

“Of course. That person is reliable.”

Since I met her in April.

Even in May.

Even in June.

Even in July.

Even in September.

“.....Huh?”

.....Unexpectedly, I wasn’t saved?

Her way of saving someone was always half assed?

She didn’t save me until it was nearly too late?

.....

Oh?

“It seems that person has a different way of loving things than I do,” Houko-chan said. “She must have thought that it would be more efficient to break into teams of two.”

“.....”

Right, I forgot something important.

That person.

She exceedingly overestimates others.

She holds everyone to the same standards.

She says absurd stuff.

“What is it, Onii-chan?”

“What is it, you say.....”

“Now, since not much time has passed, if we retrace our steps, we might be able to meet up with them if we’re lucky.”

“Ummm.....”

“And Moeta isn’t the kind of person to look for us either, so if we want to rejoin them, we’ll have to move on our own.”

“No.....” After hesitating for a bit, I decided to not use this idea. “No. It may be rude to say this, but when Aikawa-san is nearby, it throws me off.”

“Throws you off?”

“Too much power has a strong attraction, so it’s a bit difficult for a guy like me. That’s what happened the last time I came to this school, but, well, I

agree that it's better to just split up rather than waste time trying to merge in poorly. It's splitting the offense and defense. Of course, one side is going to be the bait and the other is going to take advantage of that to go in deeper. To put it plainly, it's a decoy operation. We probably don't need to worry that much about Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun."

"However, on our side it's me and..."

"Right. With Houko-chan here, I can be at ease."

I pulled Houko-chan's hand.

"Then, let's go."

".....Yes. Nonsense User Onii-chan."

Houko-chan yielded to my opinion surprisingly easily. Ah, right, now that I thought about it, she was bound by the loyalty contract. I'd forgotten. So that's why. Now it made sense why, for a while, she mostly answered with "if Onii-chan is fine with it".

Hmm.....

"Hey, Houko-chan."

"What is it?"

"Is there no way to be released from the loyalty contract once it's signed?"

"Eh... what do you mean?"

"You know, earlier in the car, you said something like how you couldn't cancel the contract on your own."

"Yes... that's right. Once a loyalty contract is made, it cannot be terminated or revoked by me alone... but."

"But?"

"....."

"But?"

"Woof."

"Don't try to dodge."

"Kyaaa....."

"....."

As expected, when it's already the fourth time, she gets more inventive.

Rather, if every time while looking away with an expression filled with such an unspeakable humiliation that it almost makes her cry she imitates the barking of a dog, it makes things hard for me.

It seems Houko-chan.....

Her character keeps going in a weirder and weirder direction.

At this rate, she'll become Kasugai-san's second coming.

I must rescue her somehow.

“.....From Nonsense User Onii-chan’s side,” eventually Houko-chan said. “You can cancel the contract anytime.”

“.....Ah, is that so?”

“When we made the contract, it was one-sidedly from my side, the *Yamiguchi’s*, but Onii-chan has the authority to scrap it. That’s how a master-servant relationship works in the first place.”

“Hmm. I see.” I nodded. “Then when we go home after all of this ends, I’ll cancel it as soon as possible. Like a kind of cooling off period.”

“.....But there’s also after that.”

“After that?”

“If something happens after that, I won’t be able to fight.”

There’s no guarantee it will end with that, Houko-chan said. That was certainly true.

“I know, but if that’s the case, you should definitely cancel your contract with me and find someone more fitting. I know that you had to make the loyalty contract with someone close for Miiko-san’s sake, but Houko-chan, that’s too rash. Instead of choosing me of all people, you should have made the contract with Moeta-kun.”

“Moeta is... even though our mothers are different, we are still siblings bound by blood.”

“Ah, so it can’t be with relatives.” I see, that’s how it is. “But I am bad, Houko-chan. I have a tendency to get somewhat haughty at home, so if you say things like absolute obedience, I may do things to you. Especially when it comes to a cute girl like Houko-chan. I’m not really a gentleman. Right, I thought of something good, Houko-chan, if it’s with Miiko-san, it--”

“That’s something that Moeta said on his own,” Houko-chan cut me off. “I wasn’t thinking about finding someone close. I thought about it properly and chose Onii-chan for the loyalty contract.”

“.....”

Thought properly.....

What was she thinking?

“There was a risk that Onii-chan would leave the hospital by the 30th, but even so, I wanted to sign a contract with you. So there’s no problem.”

“But–”

“It’s not like this is a make-up class for Moeta’s lecture, but Onii-chan, about the *Yamiguchi* I come from...”

“Yeah, they’re assassins, right? A group of killers working for just one person. Well, from what I heard, they’re like a bunch of loyal ninjas.”

Izumu-kun said so.

Like soldiers.

Like ninjas.

However, Houko-chan continued in a cold tone.

"In my opinion, the *Yamiguchi* are just a bunch of slaves. A group of cadet slaves."

".....Slaves."

"According to them, they're a proud clan that choose the master to which they pledge their absolute loyalty to themselves, but that's just sophistry. They can only exert their power for someone else and they are completely obedient to that person. If that's not a slave, then what is? The people born as a *Yamiguchi*, every one of them is in the class of a slave. They're born to be slaves. That's the *Yamiguchi*. Even Nureginu from the *Thirteen Stairs* is no exception."

"....."

"I wanted to be the exception. I hated it. I absolutely hated it. That's why I ran away with Moeta. Although I lost my home and most of my family because of that, it was for the best. I have no regrets."

"Houko-chan....."

"I didn't want to become anyone's slave."

"That's... of course. That's the normal way of thinking. I don't know what kind of education Houko-chan went through, but that's not wrong–"

"But."

Houko-chan stopped her legs.

Since our hands were connected, I stopped too.

I looked at Houko-chan.

I looked at Houko-chan's eyes.

"If even then I have to become someone's slave, I choose Onii-chan. I don't want to obey anyone, but if it's Onii-chan, I don't mind it."

Houko-chan looked up at me.

"I trust Onii-chan enough for that. Of course, this time it's for Mii-nee-san's sake, but I move just as much for Nonsense User Onii-chan. I decided for Onii-chan's sake because I didn't want to see Onii-chan get hurt anymore, so I made up my mind on my own. So please have more confidence. Please trust my judgment. And please trust me. I'll do the best I can."

".....I see. That was unnecessary from me."

"It really was."

Houko-chan nodded.

“Ah, but Onii-chan. If you’re willing to listen to just one selfish request, I’d like to ask you to do something for me right now.”

“What is it?”

“Please spare me from any direct sexual activity.”

“……”

Houko-chan said clearly.

It was lacking elegance.

“Since my body is not yet ready, if possible, I’d like you to wait seven years for that.”

“……Seven years, huh.”

It was a difficult request, I thought.

Even after signing a loyalty contract, she has no mercy.

……I wonder if it’s fine as long as it’s not direct?

Just joking.

“Then Houko-chan, what should we do now?”

“Let’s see… I want to avoid any more meddling from the *Space Creator*, so for now, let’s keep our hands connected and rand--”

“**If you have no plans, I guess I’ll have you keep me company.**”

A voice from behind.

We both turned around.

Since our hands were still connected, we got a bit tangled.

There.

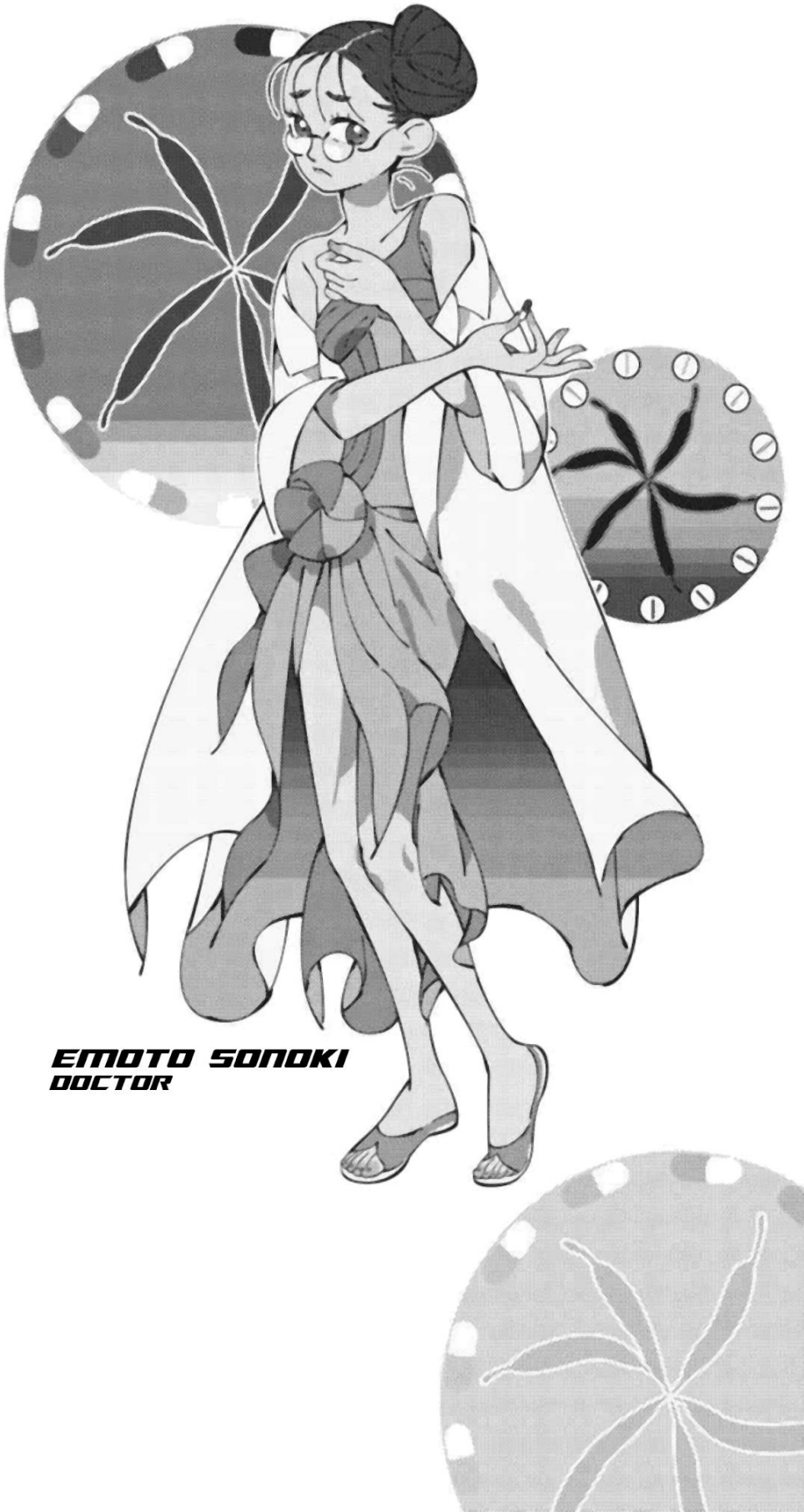
When we checked our footprints earlier, there was absolutely no one there, but now there was one person. A figure wearing a white coat.

White coat…

The *Thirteen Stairs*!

“I am Emoto Sonoki, the third step of Thirteen Stairs. As you can see, I’m a doctor. If you want a name to call me by, you can use doctor,” Emoto Sonoki said with a clear voice. “Ii-chan, there’s someone I’d like you to meet for a bit.”

ACT 8 – A DOCTOR'S MELANCHOLY



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When you want to do something, you also have to do things you don't want to, and when you don't do the things you don't want to, you can't do what you want either.

1

"Izumu-kun, you're quite strong, right?"

"Not **quite**. I'm the second strongest."

"Then could you tell me something?"

Hakata, Kyushu.

The apartment where Izumu-kun lives.

The rundown apartment where I live costs ten thousand yen per month in rent, so considering the location, the rent for this room should be about five thousand per month, but, well, since this room is furnished, I don't think that's the case.

Anyway, in one of the rooms of that apartment.

As expected, the last train had gone as I was listening to Izumu-kun talk, so I ended up having to sleep side by side with him in bed. Even though Izumu-kun technically is a man in terms of personality, his body is that of a woman, so I refused and told him I'd be fine sleeping on the floor, but he refused to budge. It was the same this time as it was last month, it seems that Izumu-kun had a very caring personality. Well, if you have such a handful of a *little sister*, it may be natural.....

So turning the lights off.

The two of us were next to each other in a narrow bed. I was still just a new acquaintance with Izumu-kun, so it was hard for me to sleep. Since I was somewhat nervous, I spoke to Izumu-kun in the dark to make the time pass.

"'Tell me something,' what is it?"

"How to become strong."

"....."

Aah, Izumu-kun groaned.

The lights were off and even outside the window, which was blocked by a thin curtain, it was quite dark in the suburbs of Fukuoka Prefecture, so it was hard to see his expression with my eyes which weren't yet accustomed to the dark.

"That's like asking a centipede how to walk."

"Does that mean asking would just make you confused? Since it's something natural for Izumu-kun."

"There's also that, but setting a centipede aside, even a guy without a hundred legs knows there's no meaning to it." Izumu-kun seemed bothered. "Don't ask me stupid questions just to satisfy your curiosity. After all, our supernatural powers can't be attained by someone with common sense like Onii-san no matter what you do."

"I'm not asking out of interest or curiosity. You know, this was also the case for the *Thirteen Stairs*, but for example, last time we got into a bit of a fist fight as a joke, right?"

"Ahh, right. I think I remember us joking around and hitting each other."

"But I couldn't do anything."

"You couldn't?"

"Of course, this isn't just to become equal to the *professional killers* and the *assassin* of the *Thirteen Stairs*, but also to fight the other guys. It's more like, you know, it's a bit weird to say it simply, but I need more of a straight way to break through."

"Aren't you meeting the *Thirteen Stairs* in three days? If Onii-san could become stronger in just three or four days, then even setting me aside, the other *professional killers* would lose face."

"That's right. But isn't there something like a secret trick?"

".....Ah. Like I said, basically it's a problem with your life itself. This is my own theory, so don't accept it as fact, but I think that in most cases a human's abilities are nurtured."

"Nurtured abilities?"

"Acquired over time."

".....I didn't expect to hear that."

For the people living in the world of darkness.

For the people living in the back world.

It's a natural talent.

Isn't it something natural?

Isn't it something destined?

At the very least.

That's what I thought they believed.

"No, if we're talking about the details, I think so too. For example, that's probably the case for the guys in the Zerozaki clan. Because they *suddenly*, without any context, become demonic killers. But even then, I think it's different from *being born with it*. Well, I'll say it in a way that's easy to

understand for Onii-san. Don't think of just *professional killers* like me, it can be from the normal world, why don't you try to think of *someone great*?"

"Someone great, huh."

There's no shortage of those.

From the geniuses on that island to this former professional killer, there's been a lot of them in these last six months.

"Great people. If you pay close attention to the people around you, there's great people too. It's not so much that birds of a feather flock together, but rather, in a lot of cases, a person changes based on the people around them and in so doing, they nurture abilities. The so-called problem of the environment."

"One's only good as the people around them. Is that it?"

"I wouldn't say that. The self is important. But if you just think about yourself without considering others, you'll just become unstable. It's like the balance between Niounomiya Izumu and Niounomiya Rizumu. So in your case, without any *professional killers* or *battle maniacs* around you, there was no opportunity for you to nurture any combat abilities. You can't win against *professional killers* who grew up around these kinds of people. That's what I think."

"....."

Certainly.

Certainly, I've only recently begun being involved with **that side**. Six years ago, this world was the only one I didn't get involved with. I didn't even know it existed in the first place.

Because I didn't know.

I didn't think of getting involved with it.

A fairy tale. A dream.

"Well, it seems like you're somewhat trained. You did something before, didn't you? A martial art in some dojo. That's why, if I were to train you constantly, you could reach an intermediate level in about three years, but doing that now is a bit...."

"Three years, huh....."

It's too long.

I can't wait that much.

"Then I guess it can't be helped. I'll just have to do it as always. It'd be fine if it were just one or two people, but for twelve, thirteen with the fox-masked man and maybe even more, it'll be difficult to escape from them with only my words....."

Shiogi-chan could have probably done it.

That girl's combat abilities were still within the bounds of normality, still on the level where they weren't outside the constraints of common sense, but her quick wits were overwhelming. I'm sure that she was the first to stand at the top of Sumiyuri Academy without possessing any special techniques.

The first and last.

Well, trying to reach that outrageous Shiogi-chan's level is absurd. She's an exception among the exceptions of exceptions and adding one more layer, an exception to that.

No, but thinking back on it, I technically did manage to escape with Shiogi-chan as my opponent. At that time, what on earth did I do.....

Hmm.

Then, could I do it.....?

"Ah, one thing."

Izumu-kun said abruptly.

"There's one thing you could do, just one time and only under very certain conditions. You could have a means to oppose the combat focused ones in the *Thirteen Stairs*, including the *Killing Names*."

".....Is there such a method?"

"Well, rather than being a method, it's more like self-destruct technique, but it's not like there isn't one."

"Tell me."

"You decide fast. Hmmm. Well....." Izumu-kun seemed to be examining me. "Well, if it's you, you might be able to pull it off. You've got quite the nerves and guts."

"I don't think I have something that great, but if there is something, tell me."

"Ten seconds."

Izumu-kun said after punctuating with a short pause.

"Just for ten seconds, there's a way to radically raise your abilities."

"Ten seconds?"

"The first ten seconds. When that's finished, you're finished. It's that kind of unbalanced method. To explain the theory, basically we, *professional killers*, are fated to *continue to kill*, to *continue to fight*. It's not something momentary like one or two, or three or four, it's something we do for our whole lives. Either you retire like me, or you disappear from this world like Rizumu. Until you do that, the condition is that we keep on killing. Do you get it?"

"I get it."

For Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

And for Yukariki Ichihime too, that was also the case.

"That's an advantage, but, thinking about it another way, we aren't fit for short, decisive battles. Because we're not ephemeral, we're **not suited towards the ephemeral**. Obviously, that's something which **they are more suited for**. There's no mistake that they stomp on common sense, but even then, a gap is a gap."

".....Hmm. I see."

"In other words, we're long distance runners. The premise is that we run long distances. Then, in opposition to that, you only have to go compete in short distance running, right? Onii-san and the others."

"Short distance running....."

That's why ten seconds.

A sprint of a mere ten seconds.

"Nurtured abilities. **On my side**, I've already run quite a long distance. If my opponent is above a certain level, I end up using that way of fighting, that way of killing. That's the gap you should aim for," Izumu-kun said. "Concretely, for those ten seconds, you must not breathe at all in the two second preceding them."

"Stopping... my breathing?"

"When they run 100 meters, the runners don't breathe at all, right? It's the same kind of thing. Unexpectedly, breathing consumes a lot of energy. For a short period, for just a short period, not breathing results in an increase in one's abilities. A remarkable one."

"....."

Short distance running.

I see, now that I'm hearing it, that's true. When you're running as fast as you can, you don't breathe. Not only for 100 meter runs, when you're extremely focused on something, your breathing naturally stops. When you get to the bottom of it, breathing is just *supplying oxygen*. There's enough stored in your body for ten seconds.

"As for you, I'm sure you've done that much unconsciously in the past without even realizing it, but you should try doing it more consciously. You have to be more thorough and more aware of it than ever before. There's a big difference between being aware and not. Your body will probably become so light you won't believe it and you'll gain some strength."

"But isn't that the same for them....."

"Basically, we **don't do that**. Well, I'm not including those crazy guys from the *Zerozaki*, but that's why I said we also have a *next*. Right, it's ingrained in us. That's why we choose to use the most efficient breathing method, what are called *short breaths* in swimming. The guys who don't hold their breath are faster than the guys who do for a limited amount of time, right? Even for world class long-distance runners, in a 100 meter race, even if they don't win, they can put up a good performance."

However, Izumu-kun added.

"Naturally, after the 100 meters, they're in a state of incredible hyperventilation. It's not a state where they can fight. Not going into that state, not falling into that state, is our method."

"So that's why it's just once."

"Right. Also, this method isn't absolute. Originally, it was a question about how much you could close the gap. It's still better to run away with your life than to try this method. In front of overwhelming power, even if you put your life on the line, you're still a small fry. I, for example, can act for ten minutes without breathing."

"....."

A monster.

With that small body, how.....

"But that's just something I learned from meeting a *breathless* guy once. I didn't have any acquired defensive abilities from the beginning, since there aren't many guys who think like that. That's why, well, using it or not depends on your nerves and guts.

"I see. Well, thanks for letting me know. That was helpful."

"You're welcome."

"Izumu-kun is unexpectedly a good guy."

"It takes time to understand my qualities."

"It seems that way."

Saying that, I sighed.

"Now... what should I do....."

I wondered what I should do.

That was three days ago, on the night of the 27th.

And now it was the 30th of September.

Inside one of the buildings of Sumiyuri Academy.

I thought the same thing.

Holding Houko-chan's hand.

In front of us was one person, one of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

The third step of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Emoto Sonoki.

Doctor.

"Didn't you hear me, *Ii-chan*? Then, want me to say it once more? Come with me. There's someone I want you to meet. The person in question wishes for it."

Emoto Sonoki was a woman.

An intellectual, well-featured face with a dignified voice. Stylish glasses. A high stature for a woman and a slender body. Probably in the middle of her twenties, about Aikawa-san's age. A very doctor-like white coat. From the atmosphere emanating from her, I could tell at a glance that she was a medical professional. I thought that while remembering my former professor from my time at the ER3 Program, Miyoshi Kokoromi.

.....Just.

Her, Emoto-san's fashion, or rather, her style, was greatly wrong in one part.

Under her white coat was a swimsuit.

A very cute one piece.

With a frilly pareo coiled around her waist.

".....!"

".....Onii-chan. I hope you're not thrilled by the surprising contrast between a white coat and a swimsuit."

"I-idiot, on what grounds? How rude."

I responded to Houko-chan's merciless whisper with a similarly low voice. In the first place, it's not something to get thrilled about. In this unusual situation, in a sense, her style was frightening. Some time ago, I was greatly surprised by the Niounomiya siblings' straitjacket style, but this far surpassed it. Well, it's not like I wasn't just slightly thrilled, but a feeling of caution came first.

Houko-chan seemed to feel the same as she put more strength in her left hand holding my right one.

Emoto Sonoki. Doctor.

I've been thinking she was a man from her name, probably because of that assumption I was careless enough not to check with Izumu-kun.

Anyway.

I need to see how the other side moves here.

I need to continue remaining silent.

Since she's a doctor, she probably doesn't have that much combat ability and if I remember correctly, Emoto-san isn't that fascinated by the fox-masked man.

Depending on how things unfold, we could even ask her to guide us, but I was a bit intrigued by her saying that there was someone she'd like me to meet. If she was talking about the fox-masked man, she would've just said it straight, so it must be someone else.

"Uuuuh."

While I was lost in my thoughts.

Emoto-san uttered the following line.

No, it wasn't a line.

It was sobbing.

"Uuuaaaaaaaah."

With tears flowing down her cheeks, she crouched down on the spot. Without even trying to hide them, they flowed down her face.

"Wh-why, why, why... I sai-said it right th-I said it th-that you come. I-I was able to ask... even then, why, why won't you, won't you, won't you, come with me... that's, maybe I didn't say it well, and I might have fumbled with my words, but even then, wh-why didn't you say, you say anything, why are you silent, why, why are you ignoring me? Say, say something....."

".....!?"

Her once graceful face was now a mess.

She continued to cry out in despair.

Without caring that Houko-chan and I were speechless.

"Wh-why doesn't anyone listen, listen to what I'm saying, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. Wha-what is it, you could've followed me at, at least respond. U uuuuaaaaaaaaaa."

"....."

"....."

"Uuuuaaaaaaaaaa. You too, you too must hate me I'm sure you do, you, you think that I'm a crazy woman who dresses bizarrely. Wh-what about it? Don't look at me like that, I'm just dressing up like this because I like it so isn't it fine? I'm not causing any trouble, or is it that just being reflected in your eyes is a trouble, then are you telling me to d-die? Wh-why, you must also want me to d-die right? You're thinking it, you don't need to say it, I can get that, don-don't treat me like an idiot, at least that much, I-I can get..... ho-how can you so simply, say someone should die? I-I can't believe it. It's

fine I'll die, but in exchange I'll curse you, I'll curse you, I'll plant maggot eggs in your capillary. Uuuwaaaaaaa."

It was quite a sight to see a woman in her twenties, and a quite beautiful one, crying unabashedly. I've encountered a lot of people in my life, but... this is quite a new character for me.

Emotional instability, it's not something like that.

"Eerrr..."

"N-no! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't get mad! Don-don't hit me, don't strike me, I-I don't like it when it hurts! I wo-won't cry anymore, I won't cry. Sorry, sorry, sorry, a-all of what I just said was a lie! P-please forgive me! Hiiiii, n-no, no, no, scary, scary. I'll do anything, p-please don't get angry. Aaauuu, f-father, mother, noo, someone... someone, someone, someone, save me, save me... Uueeee."

"....."

"Wh-why, are you silent? Why are you silent there? N-no, please say something, it, it was my bad, so, so please, don-don't hate me so much, don't hate me, don't hate me that much, I-I will, do it properly, properly, I'll do it properly, n-noo, d-don't, don't hate me so much, I-I'll stop crying now, I'll do it properly, I-I'll, I'll do it properly, I'll do it properly, I'll do it properly, I'll do it properly, I-I'll smile, I'll smile so, please, please, please, please, please, please. Y-you see, e-even I can smile properly. Wh-when I smile I'm pretty cute, I... hehehe, aahaha... ehehe."

It was an insane smile.

.....

Izumu-kun.

I... really wish you would've told me this.

Well... it was probably hard to say.

And he said he'd been in her care.

"Um... I won't inflict any harm to you, so umm, first stand..."

"I-i-iii-it's a lie, a lie, you're trying to fool me by saying that, it's, a-always the case, I-I know it, I know, don-don't belittle me, saying nice stuff with you mouth and, and what everyone does is the same. Wh-what is it this time, wh-what do you want to steal from me, I-I don't have anything now, I don't have anything now, i-it's the truth, be-believe me."

"....."

"N-no! I-it's not that,uumm, I-I wasn't doubting you, I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I-I'm a despicable woman, even, even though you are being kind, I-I am distrusting you, bu-but, but, d-don't make a face like that, e-

even if you make that kind of face it's fine, p-please don't hate me, I, normally I'm not like this, n-now I'm just a bit confused, it's wrong, this isn't the real me, I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry... it's not like, this it's not, like this it's not like this....."

She held her head and lied down.

While lying down, she continued crying.

It looked like she wouldn't move even a bit.

I don't have any experience in dealing with something like this.

"....."

And.

Houko-chan silently let go of my hand and walked briskly to her. While I was wondering what she intended to do, she lifted her up with her small arm and with the other hand, she slapped Emoto-san's cheeks.

Paww, the sound reverberated.

"Don't cry in front of Onii-chan anymore."

"....."

"Since he's someone who easily feels empathy."

She said.

At the same pace as she had gone, Houko-chan came back and took my hand again.

Without making any particular face.

Emoto-san was...

She was stunned and stared at Houko-chan for a while, but eventually, she finally stood up. The hem of her white coat was covered in dust and her bare feet were in the same situation, but she didn't seem to mind that much.

"I'm sorry."

This time she apologizes with a small voice.

Her voice and body were still trembling, but...

For now, it seems she's calmed down.

".....Um, would you mind... following me?"

"Understood," I responded instantly without leaving a pause. "If we're going somewhere, please guide us."

"Yes. This way."

Half running, Emoto-san overtook us and showed us her back. From behind she looked like just someone wearing a white coat.

"Thanks... Houko-chan. I couldn't have done anything by myself."

"Not at all....."

We talked to each other in a whisper, being careful not to be overheard by Emoto-san.

"But I wonder where she intends to lead us."

"Who knows... Well, we didn't have any plans and we didn't have any landmarks, so I don't think anything bad will happen....."

"*Ii-chan*."

Emoto-san said without turning back.

"Y-yes....."

"Your stomach... You're hurt, right?"

"Ah, well....."

The wound Houko-chan gave me.

There was only some pain and I don't think it was particularly a hindrance, but as expected of a *doctor*, she was able to notice with this little contact.

"If you're in pain, just let me know... I have some painkillers, at least."

"....."

"I-I have as many as you want."

As many as I want?

Doctor, huh.....

"I-if it's unnecessary, then....."

"Ah, no, no, no. I'll take as many as possible."

I inadvertently didn't even think about it.

I wonder how the fox-masked man manages her as a subordinate... Even for that man, her character seems like a bit too much to handle.....

"E-even for anything else, if there's something, say it anytime. I'll help you. I-it could even be talking to me about your problems. I said I'm a doctor, but I'm also a psychiatrist."

"....."

I wish you'd cure yourself first.

Is this when you use the expression of failing to practice what you preach?

"Hey... Emoto-san."

"Y-yes. What is it?"

"The person you want me to meet, who is it?"

".....So-sorry, I was told to keep it a secret. B-but–"

"No, it's fine if it's a secret."

"Y-you don't have to sound... so disappointed. That's, certainly I may have been too cold, but....."

"....."

Even though I thought I phrased it so it wouldn't sound like that.....

This is tough.

It'd be easier if she was at least younger than me.....

"Then could you just tell me where we're heading? This building is pretty complex and seems easy to get lost in, doesn't it?"

"W-we are heading towards the art room. W-we have been using this place as a hideout for some time, so I don't get lost."

"Is that so... I was wondering where the fox-masked man was."

.....So I could've come here directly after talking to Noise-kun. In any case, since I was stabbed by Houko-chan right afterwards, I couldn't have come here until today.....

"U-umm..."

This time Emoto-san was the one to start speaking.

"*Ii-chan*... Y-you seem like a good person, so there's something I want to tell you....."

".....Yes."

Hmm.....

Judging people as *good* this easily might be the source of this person's personality.

"I-I've been in the *Thirteen Stairs* for a long time. Ah, that's not a lie. It's the truth."

"It seems so."

"Because, you know, uh, people get hurt all the time around Mr. Fox."

"....."

"I-I like healing other people's injuries." Emoto-san said. "I-it makes me feel useful."

"That's why you're close to Mr. Fox."

"Y-yes. There have been a lot of injured people around him for a long time now. Since before he met me. There have been a lot of injured people, and a lot of deaths too, but if I'm here, I can reduce the number of losses even if just by a bit."

"....."

"E-even the people Izumu-kun killed, I've been reviving them in secret."

So you were doing that kind of thing.....?

I'm sure Izumu-kun would be surprised.

"That's why you should be at ease."

"At ease... what do you mean?"

"N-no matter what happens to you here on these school grounds, I'll save you." Emoto-san briefly turned back. "*Ii-chan* too and that girl too."

".....That's... I'm grateful, but... you are technically my *enemy*, aren't you?"

"The *Thirteen Stairs* are... just a group that Mr. Fox randomly gathered... I'm not really... I'm fine as long as I can heal people."

"....."

"I don't care who I'm healing. I just want to heal injuries, that's all."

".....Is that so."

Certainly, this way of thinking.

As he said, it was similar to Izumu-kun's.

Izumu-kun who just wanted to kill,

And Emoto-san who just wants to heal.

There was something in common.

"Umm... Emoto-san."

"Wh... what is it?"

Her voice seemed afraid.

"A-ask anything... anything, I'll do anything, so please don't hit me."

"..... *The world's end*– what Mr. Fox calls *the Story's end*, what do you think about it?"

When I asked this question to Kino-san...

He said he didn't care.

That he only cares about Mr. Fox.

"Wh-what I think... I think that..."

Emoto-san answered.

"From the beginning, I've thought that people should just die, so I'm fine with it... I just want the world to end quickly."

".....Don't you... enjoy healing wounds?"

"I heal injuries because... I can't stand seeing them."

Can't stand seeing them.

Because she can't stand looking at injuries.

Because she can't stand looking at other's wounds.

"I-I hate it. I like healing people's wounds, I feel alive by doing so, I feel like I'm useful, but even then, I hate wounds. I hate wounds. Blood too. I hate it. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it."

"....."

“If they die, they won’t get hurt... if they die, if they die, no one would ever have to get hurt again... if you’re live, you should just die, but for some reason no one tries to die... it’s strange, it’s strange, it’s strange.....”

Suddenly, my left hand was strongly tugged.

It was Houko-chan.

Houko-chan warned me with a small voice.

“Please don’t try to talk to that person.”

“Eh... but...”

“She’s probably not the kind of person you can get through with words... what she’s been saying since has been incoherent since earlier. It’s not like what Dissonance-san said, but... I don’t think Onii-chan’s nonsense gets through to that person. Even if it does, as long as it’s not clever, it only does so in a bad way.”

“A bad way.....”

That’s bad.

There’s nothing worse than the negative effects of nonsense.

“Ah... right, I remembered.”

Emoto-san stopped and turned around. Naturally, Houko-chan took a somewhat defensive posture, but she didn’t mind us and searched through the pockets of her white coat.

And.

“Here.”

She threw something in my direction.

I instinctively tried to catch it, but Houko-chan, who was in front of me, caught it before I could. Houko-chan confirmed what was in her hands and then passed it to me.

It was packaged tablets.

.....?

Is this the painkillers?

“They work well against Kino-san’s *poison*... this medicine.”

“.....Huh?”

“If she drinks that.... she’ll get better immediately.”

Is she talking about Miiko-san?

Is she saying this medicine works for Miiko-san’s disease?

This is the antidote?

“That’s a lie.”

Houko-chan said.

“There’s no reason for you to give this to us now.”

“It... it’s not a lie.....”

“Crying won’t fool me.”

“I-It’s not a lie, It’s not a lie, It’s not a lie, It’s not a lie... wh-why does nobody believe me... e-even kids make fun of me... I-I have never even told a lie, not once have I fooled someone, even though I don’t mean it like this, I-I–”

“I believe you.”

I said to Emoto-san.

“Onii-chan...” Houko-chan pulled my hand strongly. “Again, this easily—”

“It’s fine, Houko-chan.”

After calming Houko-chan, I repeated, “I believe you, Emoto-san.” Emoto-san said “I-it’s a lie.....” and trembled.

“Y-you’re probably just pretending to believe me... I-I knew it. Wh-what is it, what do you intend to use me for this time... Th-that’s, I will absolutely not listen to violence... l-lies, all lies.....”

“I’m not lying, I just want to hear the reason. What’s the point of giving me the antidote now, Emoto-san?”

“.....Because diseases are a sort of wound.”

I want to heal.

She said.

“I can’t stand looking...”

“But that’s...”

That’s your reason.

And shouldn’t be the fox-masked man’s reason.

The man who wants to see the end.... for the man who wants to see the end of everything, other people’s wounds don’t even enter his eyes.

Even then, why...

“Is it your own decision?”

“No.”

She shook her head like a child.

Then she turned on her heels and resumed walking.

“Mr. Fox said that I should give you that medicine as soon as I meet you.”

“Is... that so?”

What is he thinking?

Didn’t he target Miiko-san to raise my motivation? What’s he trying to do by lowering my tension after I’ve come all this way?

“He... doesn’t need it anymore.”

Emoto-san said.

"Now, um... he said he doesn't care about that woman Asano-san. That either way, it's the same."

"....."

"That since the Story has accelerated this much, even if you obtain the antidote, you won't go home."

After saying that, she went silent and advanced even further inside the building.

.....

Though I said that to her, it was only so that she wouldn't break into tears. In reality, I don't know if this tablet is the antidote. To confirm it, I must either directly face Kino-san... or the fox-masked man.

That's why I walked behind Emoto-san.

Just for that.

For the antidote.

Just for Miiko-san.

I have no other purpose. If I confirm that this antidote is real, I'll leave this school right then and there. Besides that, there's not a single reason for me to stay here.

What the fox-masked man says...

Is completely off the mark.

I may be your enemy, but even then, that doesn't mean I'm going to do what you want me to do.

Not at all.

".....Mr. Fox, where is he?"

"I don't know....."

Where did her dignified voice from when she appeared go, anyway? Emoto-san answered in an unclear and childish way. From her voice, it seemed like she was tearing up again from my question.

"I-it's not a lie, I really don't know..... wh-why does no one believe me... sniff, I-I'm just an underling, trash, garbage, a woman who can't do anything by herself, so there's no way I can know that... a-are you asking that on purpose? I-it's hard to know where Mr. Fox is... I think he's probably somewhere inside the academy....."

"What about the two I was with.....?"

"I don't know....."

"....."

“I-it’s the truth, I really don’t know. Y-you should ask that to Konomi-chan... since Konomi-chan was the one to do it. Even finding you earlier was just a coincidence.....”

“.....A coincidence, is it?”

Then this too is what the fox-masked man would call fate?

“Then... can you tell us about the other *Thirteen Stairs*? Setting aside the antidote, if possible, I’d like to meet Kino-san once more.....”

“.....Y-you know.”

“What is it?”

“P-please listen without getting angry, okay? I-it’s not like I’m the one at fault... Ah, b-but does that sound like an excuse? I-it’s not like that, it’s the truth, it’s not my fault... Ah, don’t get me wrong! I’m not trying to blame someone else, th-then it might be my fault... I’m sorry.”

“Um... Emoto-san, how old are you?”

“Hih!”

.....Why are you bending your body that much?

She nervously turned back and confirmed the distance between us. Then she collected herself and started walking as if nothing happened.

“Twenty seven years old.”

“.....Is that so.”

I thought that maybe she just looked older, but she was as she appeared.

Speaking of twenty seven... that was about the same age as Hikari-san.

That’s hard to imagine.....

In terms of personality, Houko-chan was much more mature.

Hmmm.....

It wasn’t like Houko-chan said, but this was bad. I was gradually beginning to feel empathy for her. I needed to be careful, or the other *Thirteen Stairs*... Tokinomiya Jikoku, the Thought Manipulator or Ichirizuka Konomi, the Space Creator would take advantage of me.

So.

“Emoto-san. So what about the other *Thirteen Stairs*? Does that mean you’re not cooperating with them?”

“It’s not that... uh, well it’s that, it’s not, but... you know, *Ii-chan*. I-it’s about Kino-kun.”

“Yes.”

“Kino-kun, isn’t here today.”

“Not here?”

"It's not just Kino-kun... not everyone from *Thirteen Stairs* is here. It's too dangerous."

"It's dangerous....."

What's that?

Even though I came all prepared.

"**It looked like Mr. Fox planned to do something dangerous**. Kino-kun and Furuyari-san... and also Kajou-san and Utage-san are not here."

"Then, putting it the other way around..."

Right now, excluding Noise-kun, the ones present at this Sumiyuri Academy are Emoto Sonoki, Ichirizuka Konomi, Miotsukushi Takami and Miotsukushi Misora, Yamiguchi Nureginu, Tokinomiya Jikoku, and Migishita Rurero?

"At first, it was planned that everyone should welcome Mr. Fox's *enemy*, *Ii-chan*, but....."

"Yes. That's what I heard too."

If we believe Aikawa-san's words, Kajou Akira is no longer alive, but even if we exclude him, I didn't expect three people to be absent and furthermore, I didn't expect Kino-san to be among them.

What does it mean.....?

And the fact that they easily gave the antidote away.

The fox-masked man... Saitou Takashi.

Perhaps.....

Even now, he doesn't feel like settling things?

Even after coming all this way, still.

Still...

Does it mean it's not yet the time to name himself?

"In other words, the *enemies* in the academy are," Houko-chan said. "Including you, Emoto-san, nine people?"

"Yes... ah, you people already defeated the boy at front of the gate, right?" She said as if she just remembered. "I already tended to his injuries, so you don't need to worry."

"I'm not worried....."

Well, since we left him there, I was somewhat concerned.

"It felt good to treat his wounds. There's something different about treating someone who's been hit by a car. It felt like a climax... ufun."

"....."

"Ah, we've arrived. Here."

Emoto-san stopped walking and pointed at the plate attached to the door on her right side.

On it was written "Art Room."

.....However, the art room of this academy.

The art room of Sumiyuri Academy.

What in the world were they teaching.....

It's impossible to know now, but I can't say I wasn't slightly intrigued.

"I'm back... I brought him."

Emoto-san, casually, without even confirming our reactions, opened the door of the art room and entered. I was a bit hesitant, but Houko-chan stepped in and followed her inside.

Inside were three people.

Miotsukushi Takami, Miotsukushi Misora.

And...

Niounomiya Izumu.

2

The Miotsukushi sisters.

I could tell that these two were Miotsukushi Takami and Miotsukushi Misora immediately. Since I didn't know any of their characteristics, I wouldn't be able to distinguish them individually, but if two people were standing side by side and had the same face, there was no other answer.

Identical clothing.

Identical appearance.

Differentiating between them was practically impossible.

Which one is Miotsukushi Takami?

Which one is Miotsukushi Misora?

But maybe there is no need to differentiate them?

Because these girls are a pair as one.

What do you call it again, the clothes these two were wearing... was it called a priest's garb? Though there were some modifications to the design, I saw this type of clothing before when I went sightseeing around shrines and temples with Miiko-san. Judging from the size, it was the samghāti, one of the garments monks wear.

It was certainly a strange outfit to see in an abandoned school, but... well, it couldn't beat the impact of a white coat and a swimsuit, so I was able accept it with relative ease.

The problem was that the two of them were lying on the floor of the art room, on their back, with their eyes turned up white. The two of them were both unconscious and folded in on top of each other.

And, more importantly, the problem...

Was the young girl on the opposite side of the piled up Miotsukushi sisters.

No, *young boy*.

Niounomiya Izumu.

"Yo."

The first one to talk was Izumu-kun.

He was looking at me.

"Long time."

"It hasn't really been a long time....."

"Right... Oh, Doctor, thank you. You really brought them here."

"Y-yes." *Doctor* Emoto Sonoki answered. She looked somewhat embarrassed. Looking down, she hid her eyes with her bangs. "Uh, I didn't

think I would find them this quickly, it was a completely fortuitous encounter... or rather, there were footprints, so I followed them....."

"Then, you haven't met Konomi yet?"

"Yes. Should I have brought Konomi-chan too?"

"Spare me. You know I hate her."

"R-ri-right, sorry."

"It's not something to apologize over... Ah, right, right, I forgot." Izumu-kun pointed a leg towards the two lying on the floor. "After I asked Doctor to find Onii-san, those two attacked me so I fought them off to kill time."

"Ah, is that so....." Emoto-san said. "I was wondering why Takami-chan and Misora-chan were sleeping here... May I examine them?"

"Do as you want. I didn't kill or injure them. I need to save **today's massacre** for later."

Gyahaha, Izumu-kun laughed.

"Izumu-kun....."

"Mm?"

"The 18th member of the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe; a byproduct of the thirteenth experiment; one as a pair, a pair as one; the personality opposite to Rizumu the *Carnival*, Izumu-kun the *Man Eater*... who, since last month's case, was publicly thought of as dead but was, in fact, living in retirement. Why are you in a place like this?"

".....What's with that explanatory line reeking of exposition?"

"No, it's nothing."

Actually, it was an explanation for Houko-chan.

Though she might identify him from his appearance, it was just in case.

"So... seriously, why are you here?"

"Huuh? I came to save Onii-san, of course. I thought you'd feel helpless alone... huh, what?"

Izumu-kun caught sight of Houko-chan. On top of her short, since she was in my shadow, it seems he didn't notice her until now.

"Is that Onii-san's child?"

"Do I look that old?"

"You look like the sort of person, I guess."

"....."

You say a lot.

Setting that aside... this is bad.

If I remember correctly, Izumu-kun hates the *Yamiguchi*... even if she no longer has any ties with the main house, should I introduce Houko-chan, whose origin is that of a *Yamiguchi*.....?

"Ah. Perhaps she's the person who helped you? She may look like a child, but the atmosphere she exhibits isn't that of a normal person. Ah, what's this, what's this, that's cruel, Onii-san. You're so cold, so distant. Even though I came all the way to help you like a hero."

"No matter how caring you are, I didn't think you were that caring, Izumu-kun."

".....Well, yeah."

Izumu-kun smiled mischievously.

"But it's true that I came to help you. At the very least, I consider myself to be Mr. Fox's enemy now." He pointed at the Miotsukushi sisters lying on the floor again. "Don't you think the fact that these two are lying on the floor knocked out is proof enough?"

".....Emoto-san."

I called out to Emoto-san, the *Doctor*, who was, once again, lying on the floor, not caring about getting dirty and examining the Miotsukushi sisters. Emoto-san cried "Y-yes!" with the voice of an elementary schooler being called by a violent teacher.

"W-wh-what is it..... I-I'm just doing an examination... I-I am not doing anything bad. B-but, right, I must have done or said something that displeased you, it must have been a bother to have me moving in front of you, it was inconsiderate, s-sorry."

"....."

This is bad.

It's becoming a bit funny.

"Emoto-san, how are those two?"

"How are they, you say....."

"**Are they really unconscious?**"

"Y-yes... But I don't understand why you are asking that... ah, sorry, I didn't mean to probe further, b-but, there's no need to stare at me like that, no, no matter how much you hate me, i-it's cruel, why are you doing this much, it's cruel, it's cruel, why only me... why do only I get in so much trouble, always, even though I was always doing my best, even though I was seriously living, even though I just wanted to become a doctor."

".....And the reason for them being unconscious?"

"A-a concussion....."

“Thank you very much.”

I turn back towards Izumu-kun.”

Izumu-kun was grinning.

“Are you fine with just that? Maybe Doctor is an accomplice, you know? After all, we once ate from the same plate and were pretty close.”

“I don’t doubt you that much. It’s just... well, just in case. You’re from the same house as the Miotsukushi sisters, so I thought I should at least doubt that.”

“Hah... just because we’re from the same house, it goes like this. The guys from the branch families really hate the people from the main family. I swear, I’ve already retired, but it made me realize it again, how awful it is of Mr. Fox to really try to replace the seat I stood on with these small fries... Even Onii-san might have a chance against them.”

“But...”

I looked back at Emoto-san for a moment, who was concentrating on caring for them, and then I said to Izumu-kun.

“...You didn’t kill them.”

“That’s because the time of massacre is only one hour per day.”

“I don’t think that’s the only reason, though.”

“I’m tired. I didn’t want to do any pointless exercise,” Izumu-kun said, seemingly annoyed. “I said it many times to them, that I didn’t want to fight weaklings, that they were five billion nine hundred and ninety-nine million nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine people too few, so I advised them to come back later, but they didn’t listen.”

“That recommendation is so extreme I can only think of it as provocation... But you said you’re tired? Tired of what?”

“I just arrived at this academy. I didn’t think it would be such a hard place to find, so I ended up doing a complete sweep of this area. I heard a sound like there was a car crash, which was probably Onii-chan, right? I arrived a bit before that, but I got lost in the building. When I encountered Doctor by chance, I decided to let her search for Onii-san and rested. At that time, I was completely exhausted. Since I sweat quite a lot, you could even say I was drenched. I thought you’d leave before me.”

“Izumu-kun’s gags are really unique, huh.”

I wonder who could keep up with his sense of humor.

“Well, I know it was a long march from Fukuoka, but didn’t you have a bit more time to spare?”

“I didn’t have any leeway. When Onii-san left my home in a hurry, I immediately chased after you.”

“.....”

Um.....

Fukuoka to Kyoto.

Three days by running... that’s what he said, right?

Since that was two days ago.....

.....

Did he run!?

“That’s absurd... even if you took the shortest way, it’s well over five hundred kilometers.....”

“I had a close call at the Kanmon Straits.”

“Did you swim!?”

“Gyahaha, you’re an idiot, Onii-san. I wouldn’t use my energy that pointlessly. There’s a train tunnel passing through the Kanmon Straits, isn’t there? Use your head a bit.”

“No, use a train!”

Did he fight with the Miotsukushi sisters after that situation?

And he destroyed them.

Once again, he’s beyond limits... this professional killer.

“Rather,” Houko-chan inserted a basic retort. “You didn’t have to put yourself in danger by using the train line as there is a proper tunnel for human use passing through the Kanmon Straits.”

“.....”

Ah.

Izumu-kun looked away.

It seems he didn’t know.

He was blushing.....

C-cute.....?

“Ah, um... but, Izumu-kun,” Emoto-san was the one who began talking. “Then why not come back to the *Thirteen Stairs*? I, u-until now, I was told by Mr. Fox that Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan were dead... so, I can’t put it well in words, but since you’re alive—”

“Rizumu is dead. Inside me.”

Izumu-kun said flatly.

It was like he said it to himself.

“If Rizumu isn’t here, there’s no point to being under Mr. Fox.”

“T-that’s... s-so Izumu-kun hates me too, I-I see... so that’s how it was. I thought Izumu-kun was an exception, but s-sorry, it must have been a nuisance to believe that by myself, I-I’m such an idiot, ho-how many times must I make the same mistake to be satisfied..... uuuaaa.”

“.....Stop crying. I didn’t say that. Ah, really, what a troublesome personality. Onii-san thinks so too, right?”

“No... I kinda like it.....”

What is this.....

This emotion stemming from the depths of my chest.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“Perhaps, this is love.....”

My toes were stepped on.

Precisely, the top of the little toe.

It was Houko-chan.

“.....Onii-chan.”

“.....Yes.”

Uwaah.

She had a really scary blank expression on her face.

“Um... how should I say it, please fix your habit of getting too close to everyone... you have too little sense of urgency.”

“I-I absolutely don’t have such a habit.”

“As if you’d know.”

Houko-chan was grinding my shoes with her foot.

It was pretty painful.

In response to our exchange, Izumu-kun went “Um?” and tilted his head.

“.....This girl, is she your little sister? Didn’t you say your little sister was dead?”

“Ah, no, this girl is my neighbor and–”

“I’m Yamiguchi Houko.”

That easily...

Houko-chan named herself.

“Pleased to meet you, Niounomiya Izumu-san.”

“.....Yamiguchi, huh.”

The smile disappeared from Izumu-kun’s expression.

No, calm down... if it’s just her surname, he shouldn’t be able to judge her yet. Even I didn’t realize it until just a day ago, so there’s no way Izumu-kun could easily tell from his first meeting. In his heart, he must be half sure and half doubting–

"I see. I thought you weren't normal. So you're an *assassin*."

"....."

He easily saw through it.

.....Well, I guess that's normal.

"What does this mean? Onii-san."

Izumu-kun's question was directed at me.

It couldn't be helped since he already found out, so I fulfilled my role of explaining the situation. Especially that Houko-chan had already completely cut ties with the *Yamiguchi* house and that now she had no relation to the name *Yamiguchi*. I emphasized this point and repeated it two or three times.

"Hmm..." Izumu-kun looked curiously at Houko-chan.

Houko-chan was just looking at Izumu-kun.

".....Well, it's fine."

Eventually, Izumu-kun said.

"If she's Onii-san's ally, she's not my enemy."

"Izumu-kun....."

"However, Houko-chan," Izumu-kun said towards Houko-chan. "Onii-san's enemy from the Yamiguchi, Yamiguchi Nureginu. I'll do my best to erase him."

"Please," Houko-chan answered coolly. "He has no relation to me."

".....Even though you're both *little sisters*, you're quite a different type from my sister."

Izumu-kun said to the sky as if he was fed up with Houko-chan's reaction. I thought about saying that the *big brothers* were quite different too, but I didn't want the story to become any more complicated, so I held off.

Sigh.....

We were lucky that Izumu-kun was a siscon.

I thought.

".....Anyway, with this, the remaining *Thirteen Stairs* in this academy... are five including Emoto-san... huh."

The original number was reduced by quite a lot despite us having done nothing.

Was it due to natural virtue?

"It's the devil's luck."

Houko-chan said that without restraint.

However, I thought she was right.

I thought a few of them must have been taking Aikawa-san on, so the ones I had to confront were, at most, one or two people. And if Houko-chan and Izumu-kun were to participate.....

At this rate, it seemed we would get somewhere. There was still the fox-masked man left, but... we already obtained the antidote (seemingly), so the only remaining problem was how to escape. To be honest, Aikawa-san's convertible had caught fire from the impact of the head-on breakthrough. It was an awful end for the second car that she probably just bought, but in short, we currently had no means of going back.....

But... is this it?

The fox-masked man made me his enemy.

Was it something of this level that he was aiming for?

If it was just this much, I'd experienced it six years ago.

Six years ago, it wasn't this tame.

And yet...

Was this what the fox-masked man wished for?

Was this the Story Saitou Takashi wished for?

If this is the end of the world.

If this is the end of the story.

I've seen such things to death.

"What happened? Onii-chan."

"No, nothing." I extended my hand calmly in response to Houko-chan's question. "So... what are you going to do, Izumu-kun? I mean, what do you want to do? I'm thinking of searching for Mr. Fox."

"Me too."

"Want to go together?"

"Is it fine? To trust me."

"It's fine. I'm used to being betrayed," I answered. "It's easy to trust people if you intend to get betrayed from the start."

"That's nonsense."

"It is nonsense."

I said.

"I love you, Izumu-kun."

".....That's the worst pick-up line."

"Gyahahaha." Izumu-kun laughed and left the art room, passing by our side while avoiding the Miotsukushi sisters and Emoto-san.

“Doctor. Can I leave those two to you?”

“Eh... ah, yes. Leave it to me. I will do my best.”

“Good luck.”

Saying that, Izumu-kun went ahead alone. There was the *Space Creator*, but going ahead in a place without electricity was also problematic, so I tried to go after him. However, Houko-chan blocked me from doing so.

“Mm.”

“.....?”

“Mm. Mm.”

“What is it?”

“.....Mm. Mm. Mm.”

“What’s going on? Why’re you pointing at your own face?”

“.....Mm!”

She tried to step on my foot with incredible force.

I barely avoided it.

I-I thought I was going to get crushed.....

“What is it... you’ve been scary since earlier.”

“.....Nonsense User Onii-chan, are you the type to not give food to the fish you caught?”

“Um? No, I don’t really fish. I wonder when was the last time I fished.....”

“.....You don’t need to remember.” Houko-chan pulled my hand and began to leave the art room. “Let’s go.”

“Ah, wait for me.”

I didn’t really get it.

It was weird.

.....I mean, in this school, Sumiyuri Academy, even after having closed down, there were still only weird people here. If I’m the only one being serious, I just end up feeling like an idiot.

We left the art room and closed the door.

“.....”

“Onii-chan?”

“Wait a bit.”

Just in case, I stuck to the door and investigated the inside. And, “Uuuee, everyone left, everyone left, I-I’m sure they left because they hate me, wh-why can’t I read the mood, even though I know that I’m hated by everyone, I-I should have been the one to leave, what an idiot, thinking that I was becoming friendly, e-everyone was kind so I was just allowed to be with them, ahahaha, i-it’s no good, I can’t cry, I-Izumu-kun said I shouldn’t cry,

I-I need to smile, ahahahah, hihihi, but, but leaving me out, it's awful, I'm sure they're currently saying bad things about me, they're laughing about my clothes being weird, wh-why am I always like this....." I heard that voice.

"....."

Let's meet again.

One day, let's have a talk between us.

I quickly vowed in my heart to see her again, and moved away from the door, following Izumu-kun's footsteps while still holding hands with Houko-chan.

I was able to quickly catch up with Izumu-kun.

Maybe Ichirizuka Konomi isn't around here anymore.

"By the way, Onii-san."

"What is it?"

"Aikawa Jun, is she here?"

"Yeah. She is."

"Is that so. As I thought."

"As you thought?"

"I only spoke to her a bit, but I think I understand well what kind of person she is," Izumu-kun said. "That woman... she won't miss a crucial timing."

"You really get it."

"But she's here, huh?"

"What? Want a revenge match?"

"No, as I said, I don't do that anymore. But..." Izumu-kun spoke after a pause. "I think it'd be for the best if they didn't get to meet."

".....? Mr. Fox and Aikawa-san? Why?"

"Who knows....."

"Who knows? That's vague."

"As I told you before, I don't have any parents. However, I think I somewhat know what parents are."

"Yeah."

"And from what my instincts tell me, Mr. Fox isn't not a parent." It was a calm voice without any emotion. "In every sense of the word, that person isn't a parent. That person isn't the type to be able to raise someone."

".....That's, I get that, but..."

"Can't raise, can't teach, and... doesn't care. I mean, hasn't he mostly forgotten about his child? I haven't even heard him utter the word *daughter* once, you know?"

"Yeah....."

I also felt like I hadn't heard it.

From what I knew, he only used the word *daughter* to refer to Aikawa-san once.

"That person is indifferent about these kinds of things. Rather than indifferent... he's monomaniacal. The reverse side of a monomaniac. He focuses so much on one thing that he can't see at all what's around him. You know, it was the same last month. The assistant professor and the immortal girl, even though these two continued to feel for him, Mr. Fox had completely forgotten about them until you brought them up, didn't he?"

"He did."

"Normally, that's not possible, is it?"

"Normally, it's not."

Aikawa Jun...

For Mr. Fox, he probably settled everything with Aikawa-san long ago, ten years ago. That man probably doesn't dwell on the past.

No, not just the past, but the present and the future too.

For that man, the past, present, and future are all one and the same.

There's only the end.

The words "raising a child" aren't too fitting next to the words"end of the world."

"Right, that person doesn't fuss over the process. The assistant professor, the immortal girl, Aikawa Jun, MS-2, and of course, me and Rizumu... Zerozaki Hitoshiki too, we're nothing more than waypoints to pass through one by one."

".....Izumu-kun."

Izumu-kun was in front of us, alone. Houko-chan and I were following him with our hands held. It looked like he knew where he was going as he advanced with no doubt to his steps.

I've thought about this before, but... weren't Izumu-kun and Zerozaki acquainted? Of course, I barely talked about anything related to the *Killing Names* with Zerozaki, so it's not like I heard it directly from him, but there were a lot of those kinds of remarks... and Izumu-kun also told the fox-masked man about Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The meaning of that, wouldn't it change everything.....?

It's just my intuition, but...

The reason Izumu-kun why came to this academy... isn't that somehow related to Zerozaki Hitoshiki?

It's just my intuition, but there's proof.

Three days ago.

At Izumu-kun's apartment, when the fox-masked man appointed not Zerozaki Hitoshiki but me, this Nonsense User, as his enemy, Izumu-kun looked strangely irritated.

Rather than irritated, displeased.

And the words Izumu-kun said.

"Onii-san and Zerozaki Hitoshiki are completely different."

Completely different.

Not the same...

".....By the way Izumu-kun."

"What?"

"From those decisive steps, you clearly seem to have a destination in mind, but where are we going?"

"The gymnasium."

"Huh. Why?"

"The Miotsukushi sisters said it earlier. 'Aikawa Jun will soon arrive at the second gymnasium, professional killer who experienced death once. We need to kill her in that simple maze. We will be the one to stop your retirement by force, Niounomiya siblings.' They said those kinds of small fry lines at the start."

"Hmm."

Small fry... I don't think that was the case.

Well, the opponent was Izumu-kun.

If it's a concussion, at least I won't have to be their opponent tonight, so I can rest easy for now.

.....

Come to think of it, we left the Miotsukushi sisters to Emoto-san who's in the enemy camp, didn't we?

I wonder if it was okay to leave it to her.....

"But I see. No wonder you can walk without any hesitation. I'm reassured, I thought that you might have been taking the 'If the dog walks, he'll find a stick' approach."

"Of course not. I can't do such useless things when I'm tired."

"That's right. And naturally, you got the directions to the second gymnasium from the sisters."

"No, but I think it's probably this way."

I kicked him from behind.

Izumu-kun rolled down a set of stairs.

“.....Onii-chan. I think you know this well, but that person is a ferocious professional killer.”

Houko-chan had a fed up expression on her face.

Naturally, Izumu-kun landed cleanly and, on the way up, complained “Hey, hey, what are you doing all of a sudden?” It seems he didn’t even recognize it as an attack. Houko-chan and I went down the stairs too and we lined up on the landing.

“Izumu-kun.”

“What?”

“.....If we’re heading towards the gymnasium, we need to get out of the building first.”

“I see.”

“We can’t go up stairs if we want to exit the building.”

“Heh. Pretty smart.”

“Izumu-kun.”

“What?”

“Go in the back.”

If possible, while he was in the back, I wanted him to go somewhere else with Ichirizuka Konomi’s *Space Creator*.

I swear.....

What were we doing getting even more lost?

Which floor are we on in the first place?

I remembered about Hime-chan’s *strings* in my backpack. If I remembered correctly, I once did some rappelling with those *strings* before.... well, maybe Houko-chan and Izumu-kun could jump off even without the *strings*, but I didn’t want to. Therefore, let’s hold off that idea until someone brings it up. It was also a secret that I had these *strings*.

But the information that Aikawa-san is in the gymnasium is in itself a good find. I’m sure that Moeta-kun was with her too. Since a gymnasium is a building that stands out quite a bit in a school, it wasn’t bad as a meeting spot. Since there were so few opponents (if you asked me, we could remove Emoto-san from that amount too. That person was probably no one’s enemy, she’s just a *healer*), so there was already no meaning in acting separately.

That being said.....

This place really was a maze.

Breaking through our guide, Noise-kun (literally breaking through, damn it) might have been a mistake after all. That person always goes too far with everything she does...

And.
I see **if that's the case**.
This is about as good a time as any.
The small fries were eliminated.
The actors are all here.
And most of all...
The daughter's failure is the father's failure.
Regardless of whether he had been expelled from causality...
The host should be the one to guide the guests.

"**Yo, my enemy.**"

After going further down the stairs, the fox-masked man was there.
As expected,
He always knew when to show up.
He wouldn't miss the crucial point.
Really, both the father and daughter liked to have us wait.
"Are you enjoying the party?"
"I haven't done anything yet."
"Then..."
The fox-masked man said.
"...follow me. For you who has done absolutely nothing so far, I will finally let you do something."

ACT 9 – AN UNCONTINUING END

0

When thinking about the future, we assume the past.
In most cases, people call the past the future.

1

Six years ago...

I wonder what I wanted to become.

I wonder what I wanted to do to Kunagisa.

I wonder what in the world I wanted to do.

I wanted to break her.

I wanted to kill her.

I wanted to ruin her.

I wanted to reject her.

I wanted to love her.

I probably wanted to become a hero.

I was a child who wanted to become an ally of justice.

By protecting Kunagisa Tomo.

Turning the Kunagisa Syndicate against me.

I didn't have self-awareness, but...

If you asked me back then, I'd have said it was merely my plan, but likely, by protecting Kunagisa Tomo, I was trying to digest something inside me.

Digest, eliminate, erase.

I tried to forget.

It was for both revenge and atonement.

In the end...

At first, it was my little sister.

I don't think that Kunagisa Tomo is a substitute.

I don't think she's my little sister's substitute.

For me, she's the one and only.

However...

I destroyed her.

I killed her.

I ruined her.

I rejected her.

I couldn't love her.

Kunagisa Tomo was...

Much bigger than I had thought.
She was an exception.
I didn't understand that at the time.
I didn't understand it.
Because I didn't understand, I was scared.
I was scared of Kunagisa Tomo.
I didn't run away because I lost.
I ran away because I was scared.
I ran away.
Ran away forever.
Ran away anywhere.
However... I...

I did the same thing at the place I ran away to...

"Kukukuh."
The fox-masked man,
Looking at us, he laughed happily.
Yamiguchi Houko and Niounomiya Izumu... looking at me, he laughed.
"Quite a party. Having the first and second ranked *Killing Names* at your side, huh? Even I didn't have this many comrades when I was nineteen."
".....You were probably lacking in popularity," I said. "That or natural virtue, I guess."
"Whether you have that kind of thing or not, it's the same."
The fox-masked man turned his back on us.
He started going down the stairs towards the second gymnasium, not even checking to see if we were following behind him.
Obviously, we didn't have a choice.
He understood that we didn't have any choice.
"....."
However...
He didn't have a single word for Izumu-kun, his past subordinate. I was half-expecting it, but that indifference, I can't help but think of it as abnormal. No matter what, it can't be unsurprising for the fox-masked man that Izumu-kun is here...
.....Is it unsurprising?
Don't tell me... was that why he sent me to Fukuoka in the first place?
".....Onii-chan."

Houko-chan whispered to me.

"Is he your enemy?"

"More accurately... his enemy is me. If you put Miiko-san aside."

".....He seems full of gaps," Houko-chan said. "Now, of course, I wouldn't kill in front of Onii-chan, but making him unable to act should be possible."

"....."

"What should I do?"

".....No." I strongly grasped Houko-chan's hand. "Please don't. He's someone who we shouldn't act carelessly against."

"However, it would be quite a problem if he were to join with the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Judging from what Onii-chan told me, that person probably possesses the talent to draw out the most out of a person, to draw out the talent within someone."

"That would be..."

That would be my opposite.

I obstruct people's talent.

"At any rate, Houko-chan. And also Izumu-kun. I want you two to hold on a bit more before acting."

"Hmm. Acting, huh?"

Izumu-kun laughed at my words.

"Hey, Mr. Fox." And he called out to the fox-masked man's back. "I honestly don't have much interest in you."

"....."

"It's just that Rizumu took a liking to you, and since we share the same body, I had no other choice than to obey you, but, that being said, it's not like I'm not grateful to you. But, you know, what's up with making this Onii-san your *enemy* instead of Zerozaki Hitoshiki? If this is the case, then **what Rizumu did**, what was that for?"

".....Ah."

The fox-masked man suddenly turned around.

And after all this time, as if he just remembered,

"It's been some time, Izumu."

He said.

".....!"

"I'm sorry for dragging you out of retirement. At one point, I thought about respecting your and Rizumu's wishes and leaving you alone, but I had some unforeseen circumstances on my side, so I needed your power."

"Needed, you said?"

"Yes. It's fine even as an *enemy*. Be at my side."

He said those arrogant words naturally.

And then he started walking again.

Honestly, hearing that conversation, I was trembling with fear thinking that Izumu-kun would riot. Now that I think of it, I saw Rizumu-chan talking to the fox-masked man, but I've never seen Izumu-kun do so. That too was half-expected, but... It wasn't a harmonious relationship at all.

However, the part about unforeseen circumstances bothered me.

What was it?

Was it... about Aikawa-san?

"Um... Mr. Fox."

"What is it, my enemy?"

"Did you already meet Aikawa-san?"

"....."

The fox-masked man didn't even turn back.

"What? Is she here?"

"I-is she here, you ask... really?"

"I just, because you seemed to want to go to the second gymnasium, I came out to guide you. Hmm, then my daughter is heading towards the second gymnasium? That means I need to slightly change the plan again."

".....Is that all you have to say?"

"'Is that all you have to say'. Hmm." The fox-masked man said. "I wonder... was there something else I should have said? That woman, my daughter has already been expelled from causality just like me, so she has no impact on the Story's end."

"Aikawa-san was.....?"

Expelled from causality?

What is he saying?

For someone possessing that much presence.

"Isn't that why she's a contractor (alternative)?"

"....."

"If you were originally powerless like me, it would be fine, but for the one who was perfect from the start, for my daughter who was originally the strongest, to be expelled from causality just doesn't make sense. **Despite being the strongest, she can't do anything alone**. Well, in my daughter's case, more than being expelled, it's like she was created bearing the outside of the Story in mind, so I guess it's natural."

"The outside.....?"

"Didn't we talk about it before... about how my daughter was the next approach after Kuchiha? **An existence made to destroy the Story**."

The next approach.

He used that word.

"A failure, and a big one at that. Thanks to that, I was expelled from causality, and now we're here. I've done a lot of things since my exile, but that failure still hurts. It still echoes now. I don't intend to start over, not even one bit. However, even if I wanted to start over, it wouldn't be that easy."

"Why is that?"

"Because the connection between me and my daughter was completely severed. It's called insulation."

Insulation...

I don't know when, but I used that word to describe Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

His existence was an insulator.

If so, am I the same?

Am I an insulator?

"No, you're not." The fox-masked man said. "Your existence is far from an insulator. You **fixed the connection between me and my daughter**. Using yourself as an intermediary, using yourself as a catalyst."

"....."

"I don't care about someone like my daughter, but your existence has meaning. That's why you are my enemy."

".....What a selfish thing to say."

I said.

There was no small amount of irritation included.

"Not caring about your own daughter."

"'Not caring about your own daughter'. Hmm." The fox-masked man laughed, sounding bored. "If I were to respond to those words, what parents do with their children is their own business. After all, she was originally a part of me."

"She's not your biological daughter, is she?"

The three had raised her.

And she was the child of none of them.

Aikawa-san...

"Aikawa-san is your sister's child, isn't she?"

"**My sister's child and my child**."

The fox-masked man said.

"**Though which sister it was was unclear until the very end**."

“.....? .....!?”

I didn’t understand for a moment, and then I understood in an instant.

“Y-you... with your sister...”

“What? Didn’t my daughter say that much? What, did she hide it... oh, that girl. Kukukuh. Then, shall I tell you something pleasant? My sisters... both of them had the same name, though the characters were different. Saitou Jun and Saitou Jun.” (TL: both are different from the characters used for Aikawa Jun and Aikawa Junya)

“.....!”

“The only thing she inherited from Aikawa was his last name.”

“.....That’s crazy.”

“It’s nothing to get surprised about really. It’s just different from a parent’s perspective. For them, they were two daughters, but for me they were two big sisters... Kukukuh. Wouldn’t you understand, Izumu?”

“.....Keh.”

Izumu-kun cursed.

“Don’t treat me like I’m the same.”

“We’re the same. There’s nothing different between me and you. Oops... this might have been a bit too stimulating of a conversation for a child like you, Yamiguchi Houko-chan.”

Being called out,

Houko-chan turned to the side with a frown.

“Looks like she hates me,” laughed the fox-masked man as if it was nothing.

“Ah, right, right... my enemy. One thing, first I need to apologize for one thing. Umm... what was it, right, right. That woman, Nanananami Nanami–”

“.....Don’t you mean Asano Miiko?”

“Yeah, that was it. Well, either is fine. Sorry for having involved that woman, Asano Miiko. I regret it from the bottom of my heart.”

“.....”

It was an unbelievably shameless thing to say.

I didn’t even feel like retorting.

“I think you may have already received the antidote from Doctor Sonoki, but perhaps you haven’t. If you haven’t–”

“I’ve received it,” I answered. “However, even after receiving it, I’m not going to forgive you.”

"'I'm not going to forgive you'. Hmm. That's fine, whether I'm forgiven or not, in the end, it's the same. But, well, for this case, it was really unnecessary. Rather than accelerating, it almost paused things, which is far from my objective. That's why I asked you to let me apologize."

"....."

"If you ask me to get on my knees, I'll do it. I wouldn't want **this boring strife** to get in the way of our match."

"Boring you say...." I felt my voice tremble. "How selfish can you get... who in the world do you think you are?"

"Same for you. Also, I didn't think you **knew**."

The fox-masked man said with a flat tone.

"I didn't think you'd ever get the chance to find out about **the connection between me and you**, **so I thought I would teach you**. However, **it seems you already know, don't you?**"

"....."

I was attacked by Kino-san on the sixteenth.

At that point, Miiko-san got infected with the poison.

And certainly...

At that point, I didn't know anything.

I only put things together...

When Hikari-san, or perhaps Teruko-san, told me about the relationship between Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun at that hotel.

It was inevitable that I would become the fox-masked man's enemy.

It was already the predetermined destiny.

I realized that.

"It took me an awfully long time to grasp what you were talking about with that maid in the hotel. It seems you were quite careful, weren't you? It's inconvenient without Rizumu at times like these. In the end, assassins are assassins, the right people in the right places. **I only learned that you knew about that** yesterday. I already figured you would be researching me, but it was beyond my expectations that you would reach there. I managed to revise my plans, but it was already after Noise went to see you at that point. The festival before the party."

".....What are you doing, trying to play with words?"

"Well, even so, the *poison* that Raichi transferred was considerably weak, so nothing big will happen. For someone with a strong vitality, it'll fade in about a week. When you return, you should make her drink it quickly. She'll probably recover in no time."

“……Really, you don’t care about anything but yourself.”

“I don’t even care about myself. Isn’t that the same for you?”

“I’m different. I’m not like you.”

“We’re the same. But, well, you’re still young, huh?”

The fox-masked man said.

“But there are also things you can only do while you’re young… That’s a lesson. You should remember it, Houko-chan.”

“……Don’t refer to me so casually.”

Houko-chan responded, not ignoring him this time.

And she did so without mercy.

“It’s as you said, I hate people like you.”

“Ho,” The fox-masked man shrugged. “That’s weird. Normally, I’m pretty popular with young girls. Or maybe you’re too young, **Houko-chan**. Don’t you see my charm?”

“People like you… people who don’t have anything they want to protect, I hate them.”

“That’s the line of a *Yamiguchi*. Not fitting for a runaway girl.” Kukukuh, the fox-masked man laughed. “Don’t let yourself be washed away by your emotions. The thing that you should float on is destiny, nothing else.”

“If you want to see the end of the Story, you should just commit suicide. It’s a pain if someone who’s already dead is still wandering around. Your existence is nothing more than a eyesore for everyone.”

“You’re really sharp, Houko-chan. If you keep being such a tomboy, **the Onii-chan you love so much** won’t care about you.”

“……”

Houko-chan went silent.

What… isn’t she going to argue back?

Since they’re siblings, it’s natural that Houko-chan liked Moeta-kun, and it was already obvious that there was no way Moeta-kun would hate Houko-chan.

Weird.

Hmm. That would mean that the fox-masked man had already grasped that Moeta-kun was here. Well, since Houko-chan was here, I guess it was normal for him to be here too?

We finally got out of the building

“This way, we’re going around from the back,” said the fox-masked man as he proceeded alongside a flower bed that was set up near the school

building. Since there was no one to take care of it anymore, it was a mess, but even so, there was a fair amount of flowers blooming.

The flowers were blooming.

"If we come out here, there's the gymnasium, still..."

This time, the fox-masked man seemed to be talking to himself, his words addressed to no one.

"It's strange."

"Strange... what do you mean?"

"You guys, you're heading toward the second gymnasium for your own reasons, right?"

"That's, yeah....."

To meet up with Aikawa-san.

"Right. And my daughter is heading towards the second gymnasium for her own reasons. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah....."

I looked at Izumu-kun.

Izumu-kun looked irritated, emitting an aura that signaled he didn't want to be talked to, so I immediately returned my gaze to in front of me.

Well, we couldn't know the reason just from the Miotsukushi sisters' words, but since it's that person, I'm sure Aikawa-san has a clear reason to move.

"And..."

The fox-masked man said.

"I, for my own reasons, am heading towards the second gymnasium."

".....Eh?"

"I must slightly change the plan, isn't that what I said? Since you seemed to want to go to the second gymnasium, I offered you my guidance, but to be completely honest, I also have a reason to guide you, to guide my enemy to the second gymnasium."

"....."

"Isn't it strange? Even though our wills are all different, in the end, everyone is converging towards a single point."

"Then from the start..."

"I was planning to guide you to the gymnasium from the start. You were the ones to crash into Noise, weren't you?"

"....."

"Really, you do such outrageous things. Although, after that, I didn't have any words for the actions of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Go meddle a bit if you have some free time, I only gave an order of that level."

"That's... random."

"In the first place, they're not the kind of people who listen to orders. The Miotsukushi sisters, for example... no, I guess it's pointless. Anyway, the second gymnasium."

Turning at the corner,

Suddenly, a gigantic building appeared.

It seemed that was the second gymnasium.

It looked more like an indoor stadium than a gymnasium, but... near the top of this tall building, "Sumiyuri Academy Second Gymnasium" was clearly written.

Taking a big detour, we went around to the back of the building.

And in front of the door to the gymnasium,

"Izumu."

The fox-masked man said.

"You can break it. It's locked and I don't have the key."

".....Spare me." Izumu-kun said, without looking at the fox-masked man. "If I do that now, I might accidentally smash your face."

"I see. We can't do anything about that." The fox-masked man said in a flat voice. "Then, my enemy. The anti-lock blade you have, could I request it?"

".....Why?"

How does he know that I have it? But instead of letting the question trail off, I silently pulled out my lock-picking blade and handed it to the fox-masked man. He looked at it first, curiously admiring it.

"Hmm... I see."

"What is it?"

"To think that this knife passed from Zerokzaki Hitoshiki and found its way to you. I'm deeply impressed."

"I didn't know this was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's."

"Formerly, probably. When my daughter **killed** Zerozaki Hitoshiki, she acquired it, as if stripping him off. It also passed by the great thief, Ishimaru Kouta's hands, but, in the end, it became yours. That's interesting."

"....."

"Outstanding tools choose their owners."

".....It's surely just a coincidence."

"'It's surely just a coincidence.' Hmm. You still say things like that... that being said, this knife originally came from the hands of a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, Furuyari Zukin."

".....Is that so?"

"Yes. Zukin also crafted *Mind Render*, for example. In that field, he is a famous old man, but... no, it's fine. Let's put that topic off for later."

The fox-masked man unlocked the door and gave the knife back to me. I put it away and quickly followed him to the inside of the gymnasium.

Upon entering, we found ourselves in a small room, similar to a waiting room. It was probably the back of the stage present in most gymnasiums. From the curtains, I could see to the other side of the stairs in the back, so it's surely something like that.

"What time is it now?"

"What?"

"Time, the time, what time is it?"

"Uh....." I checked my watch. The watch I received from Hime-chan. "Eleven past fifty....."

"'Eleven past fifty.' Hmm. Of course, it's the afternoon."

"Of course, it's the afternoon."

A lot of time had passed without me noticing. Since today was the thirtieth of September, there were less than ten minutes left...

In less than ten minutes.

"In less than ten minutes, it'll be October."

".....Yes."

"My enemy. I like September."

".....What?"

What was he saying?

So suddenly.

"Because people don't die."

"....."

"And I hate October. Too many people die in October. I wonder why. In my life, it's constantly been like that. Up to now, no one around me had died in September. But even if you live through September, only a few can live through October."

".....Perhaps that's..."

That was...

The meaning of Kino-san's words?

Even though there was a risk of being killed, was that the reason he sent me to Izumu-kun?

……Stupid.

It was too stupid.

Isn't that just statistics?

It didn't serve as proof.

Did he base his life on that…….?

But certainly, no one died.

Today too, no one had died yet.

The fortune-teller, Himena Maki, died in August.

And apparently the conflict inside the Kunagisa Syndicate had seen almost no deaths since we entered this month. Aikawa-san, who was also supposed to be dead, was living as if it was natural.

That, that kind of thing…

It's obviously just a coincidence.

Just chance.

"Now."

Kukukuh, after laughing,

"I wonder how many will be left in the *Thirteen Stairs* by the end of next month. And, my enemy, the people around you too."

"……"

"This way." Saying that, the fox-masked man climbed the small stairs in the back. "It'll be time soon."

"……Yes."

However… even the fox-masked man, did he hate people dying? No, it didn't seem to have that nuance. Rather than hating it, he said it like it was inconvenient.

Inconvenient.

It's bad for his convenience.

That means he is the worst.

…….It was now eleven past fifty-one.

The four of us came out on the stage.

The curtain wasn't lowered.

It was an immense gymnasium. There were even spectator seats on both sides. As I thought, it looked more like a stadium than a gymnasium. Seeing all that from on top of the stage was somewhat dazzling. Even though we weren't particularly high up, it felt like I was floating. Like I was falling, that kind of feeling.

The fox-masked man sat in the middle of the stage and crossed his legs. Arriving here, he took his fox mask off . Without saying anything, I sat down next to the fox-masked man. Houko-chan sat down next to me. Izumu-kun didn't sit down, but stood at a distance from us.

Facing the stage.

On the other side, facing the stage...

An iron door was there.

It was closed.

As if obstructing, it was closed.

As if protecting, it was closed.

It was quite dark in the gymnasium, but unlike inside the school building where I was earlier, the windows were large enough to allow for no problems in terms of lighting, and once your eyes got used to it, it wasn't too dark.

"Now, for this month's climax."

Eventually, the fox-masked man said.

"To finish, let me say some boring words."

"Boring..."

"About my previous failures. My enemy, it seems you really like them... about my daughter."

"....."

"The next approach after Kuchiha, the next stage. I had two colleagues... Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya."

"Kajou Akira is..." I said, bearing Izumu-kun's words in mind, a former member of the *Thirteen Stairs*. "Already dead. I heard from Aikawa-san."

"Yeah. That is, in fact, true."

The fox-masked man easily acquiesced.

"However, he still lives on inside me."

"....."

"Despite being dead, he's the only one to stay alive inside me. The others, everyone, when they die, they remain dead. There were many examples like Kigamine and Kuchiha, who were dead inside me even though they were alive, but..."

".....From hearing you speak, I think you're cold towards humans."

"'I think you're cold towards humans.' Hmm. Maybe. However, before that was really the case, I had friends at the very least."

"Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya."

"Yeah," the fox-masked man said. "About this, my enemy, I think I already told you and Izumu, but just in case, since Houko-chan is here for the

first time, I will resume my explanation. About the immortal girl that is Madoka Kuchiha--"

"I heard."

Houko-chan said briefly.

"Please don't pay any mind to me."

"……A good answer. But the more I am hated, the more I want to care about you. I'll absolutely explain. That's already decided."

"……"

This part was like Aikawa-san……

"The immortal girl. The girl outside of causality, **not involved with anyone or anything**, that existence which was like a misprint. It taught me the existence of the Story known as the world. In the end, I couldn't get any more than that from Kuchiha, but I had a hint. That's why, next I planned for the collapse of causality."

"Collapse…….?"

"I judged that collapsing would be the same as ending. However, I was wrong. I was nearly about to reach the point of smashing causality into pieces, but that didn't have anything to do with the Story's end. It was a big failure."

"A big failure and the results."

"The results… I died, Junya died, Akira died and, at that time, *the existence I created to collapse causality*, my daughter, died as well."

"……"

"However, my daughter and I survived. Even though we died, even though we should have died, we survived. Now… whether that was in September or in October……." The fox-masked man showed an expression of being lost in thought for a bit. "Well, the price of having survived was big. My daughter and I got expelled from causality and ended scattered apart, severed."

That's the border.

I know up to that point.

"Nevertheless, my enemy. How should I say this… even I have trouble putting it in words, but there are unexpected parts about the past where you feel like praising yourself. Actions you did without reason, just on a whim, but after living longer and looking back on them, surprisingly, you're shocked at how they almost seem like clairvoyance."

"…….What are you talking about?"

"For example, Kigamine and Kuchiha. Those two, who I already considered dead, I failed to finish them off, that's how it was. That was a

failure, no matter how you think of it, a failure, a regrettable mistake. However, thanks to that mistake, you and I were able to meet, my enemy."

"....."

"Of course, with Back Nozzle, even if those two weren't there, you and I would have met, but as those two were the most fitting for our meeting, there is no mistake that it was accelerated."

Accelerating.

Accelerating the Story.

"And now, once again. My daughter, despite being a failed product in my eyes, she played a role in your development."

"A role... it wasn't something that small."

Thanks to her...

How much had I accelerated?

"And one more thing, the organization that was necessary in creating my daughter, *the existence that would collapse causality*.... no, I should say facility, that facility now known as the ER3 System's MS-2 branch, for it **to be useful one more time**. Who could have thought? Even if someone had, it would at most have been Junya..."

"Being useful one more time....."

"Don't play dumb, my enemy."

The fox-masked man laughed provocatively.

"**The place of fate between me and you, right?**"

"....."

"You should already know," The fox-masked man said. "People who have somewhat of a connection with me, who were already expelled from causality, every one of them is crazy. The *Thirteen Stairs* are, in other words, a gathering of that sort of people. However, even with the *Thirteen Stairs*, before meeting you, I haven't even gathered half of them. I wonder why."

"For you... isn't it because it's hard to form a strong connection when you have been expelled from causality?"

"Exactly! And under such circumstances, I couldn't measure how strong the connection between you and me was. For me, you are without a doubt an *enemy*, but for the current me who can't even break the connection of *ally*, I wonder if my *enemy* will be able to stay my *enemy*. No, I already know the answer. I already experienced it. It can't possibly stay like that. Thinking of what ties the connection between me and you, it is, at most, my daughter, Aikawa Jun."

As I tied the connection between Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

Aikawa Jun tied the connection between me and Saitou Takashi.

However…

Just with that, it wasn't enough.

"That's not enough."

"……..That's why… Miiko-san."

"No, that's, well, something like insurance. Like I said earlier, I already knew from way before that. I've been looking forward to telling you about this for a while now, but… that's fine, everything is fine. Even that seems trivial. Really, why, why, did MS-2 play a role at this point… I didn't expect it."

"……."

What the fox-masked man wanted to say…

I already knew.

I knew.

I knew.

I knew.

However, I didn't want to think about it.

However, I didn't want to remember it.

Don't say any more than that.

Don't put it in words.

Her…

Don't say her name.

"Ten years ago, I left the ER2, what's now known as the ER3 system. Since I had died, I had no other choice but to leave, but those academic idiots… those mad lunatics **continued the MS-2**. Even though Junya, Akira and I were already gone, they continued the research with our remains."

"……."

"There was no way they could do anything without us. Needless to say, for those guys, that was something that even young kids could understand, but, well, it's not like I don't understand their feelings. My daughter was the strongest."

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

"Aiming to make thunder fall twice in the same place, I guess. Rather, for them, Junya, Akira and I were probably just eyesores for them. That's why they advanced frantically with agile footwork. However," The fox-masked man said while smiling as if he was watching a child's prank. "Without us, there was almost nothing they could do. Because the documents, the documents were all inside our heads. In other words, even I could only

replicate one third of my daughter. Not to mention the MS-2, they couldn't do anything. Making light of them, I left them alone."

"You left them alone?"

"Unlike with Kigamine and Kuchiha, **I didn't have enough attachment to feel sympathy for them** and, speaking honestly..."

"What is it?"

"I forgot them."

"....."

"Don't look at me like that. From what I heard, aren't you pretty forgetful too?"

"You far surpass me in that field....."

Also...

I couldn't forget what I wanted to forget.

I don't even have to think back, I remember.

"Setting that aside..." The fox-masked man continued without showing any guilt. "But that MS-2... a few years ago, they produced a miracle. **A recreation of my daughter that should have been impossible**. That..."

"**You know that better than anyone**."

I had no other choice than to remain silent.

Words wouldn't come out.

Not even one bit of nonsense would come out.

Against the fox-masked man who had yet to name himself, even if I used it, it almost definitely wouldn't work. The effect wouldn't show.

"**That miracle could have happened** only because you became a student of the ER Program. That's what I judged. That's what I analyzed. You **possess the talent of creating miracles**."

"You're expecting too much of me. Why do you and Aikawa-san overestimate people like that? I haven't done anything—"

"**It feels to me that not doing anything is your talent**," The fox-masked man said. "Isn't that something you realized this time?"

"That I realized....."

"I started messing with you in earnest on the 16th of September, the day I sent Raichi to your hospital. And all the way until today, you probably **haven't done anything about it**. Maybe you did a few things, but concretely, **you did nothing**."

"....."

"Despite not doing anything... this situation. Many people became your allies. Various people have saved you. In this past half-month, how many people have helped you? Including Izumu and Houko-chan, who are present here."

"....."

"The same as me," The fox-masked man said. "But despite not having been expelled from causality, despite not doing anything, I can't take it."

"I haven't done... anything."

"You didn't. Even now, and even when you were in the ER Program, when you were running riot alongside my daughter's successor, you didn't do anything."

".....Setting now aside."

I was barely able to argue back.

"The period when I was a student in the Program is already in the past. The current me has no relation to it."

"Though you aren't really thinking for a second that it has no relation to you. You already understand it, don't you? However, you have a connection with my daughter, that wouldn't have been the case with Zerozaki Hitoshiki. I'm happy that you are my enemy."

".....I had no idea that **she was Aikawa-san's successor**. Until I heard that you **did some outrageous things** in MS-2, I didn't know about it. Meeting Aikawa-san was just a coincidence. And meeting **her** too."

"That's the connection between you and me."

The fox-masked man said as if he was bringing things to a conclusion.

"That has confirmed that you're my enemy even further."

"....."

"With that, were you able to understand? Houko-chan."

Skipping over me, the fox-masked man asked Houko-chan. She wore a truly bored expression.

"What a selfish monologue."

She said.

"In other words, your past and Onii-chan's past are connected at a single point. It's just that, right? Getting this excited from just that... it's on the same level as bragging about having famous people as relatives. Whether your daughter is a common acquaintance with Onii-chan or whether your daughter's successor is Onii-chan's friend, what does that matter?"

"It doesn't."

The fox-masked man said.

“Kukukuh. Being hated that much, I’m really taking a liking to you. Houko-chan, how about it, want to join the *Thirteen Stairs*?”

“.....Wouldn’t that make it have too many members?”

“Doesn’t bother me. I would only have to change the *Thirteen Stairs* to the *Fourteen Stairs*. I would engrave Houko-chan’s name in the fourteenth place. It’s just a number I decided on randomly. Also, Noise looks like he won’t be useful for a while.....”

“.....As I said, I hate you... no, hold on for a moment.”

“Did you change your mind?”

“.....My name in the fourteenth place... is that what you said?”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

Then... **who is in the thirteenth place**?”

To Houko-chan’s words...

Izumu-kun and I shivered.

Right, even including the retired number, Kajou Akira, there were only twelve names listed on the list in that envelope. We thought half-mindedly that it would be thirteen with the fox-masked man, but **there was no way that was the case**.

“.....Whoops. I let something slip.....” The fox-masked man wore a frown, unusually. “Me, of all people... good grief. Even though I made it a secret.”

“A secret.....”

“For the small toys sold with foods, it’s natural for there to be a secret item. I have always been a man of dramatic effect, I always have a surprise for guests to enjoy. The *Thirteen Stairs* is **twelve people plus one**. Well, not thirteen people.”

“Then the last one.”

I had a bad feeling.

I was having a bad feeling.

In the first place, I knew..

There was no way I wouldn’t notice.

However, I purposely pretended to not notice, to not know, to not understand.

Even when Izumu-kun asked about the number of people, I deliberately ended the topic, using light words. Saying things like how it wasn’t that big of a deal.

I mean... I.

At that point, I knew.

What the fox-masked man did in MS-2...

I knew.

"Though my name was erased from the ER3 System, I have a lot of old friends who are willing to help me out. They are quite flexible. Of course, that includes people from MS-2 as well. The people from the *Thirteen Stairs*, they called you *Ii-chan*, didn't they? That is, of course, because I told them to."

"....."

"You probably thought that I was making fun of Kunagisa Tomo, but that's wrong. And, of course, I wasn't pointing at your sister either. **There is another one, isn't there? Someone that called you *Ii-chan*..."**

The hints were scattered throughout.

But.

But she...

But she's dead.

Right in front of me.

She burned to death in a deflagration.

She completely died.

"If you say she died, my daughter and myself also died ten years ago. For me, and for you as well, it doesn't matter whether they've died or not. Whether they're dead or alive, it's the same thing. What matters is..."

The fox-masked man,

Grabbed the masked by his side.

He put it on again.

"Whether they are living in your heart, isn't it?"

The fox-masked man said.

"**My daughter's successor, is she still living on in your heart? Then**..."

Clank, there was a sound.

From the front the door.

The front door was about to be opened.

From the gap came light.

Light suddenly poured in.

"Out of time, huh?"

Kukukuh, the fox-masked man laughed.

"It's the ten year reunion between me and my daughter. The originally impossible reunion. I think no one's expecting it, but if we embraced, it would make for a perfect picture."

"Aikawa-san."

From the other side of the door came two people.
Aikawa Jun and Ishinagi Moeta.

We could see their silhouettes from our side, so we understood, but... even though we were in the middle of the night, even for those two, it would take a few moments for their eyes to adjust since they just came inside.
But those two are fine for now.
Those two... I wonder what kind of conversation they had.
The grim reaper and the contractor.
And, in the first place, why the gymnasium...
"……!?"
Behind those two.
One other person was there.
There was one more silhouette.
A childlike, small silhouette.
A baseball cap worn on the opposite side.
A yukata... and a fancy fox mask.
The one I saw in the parking lot,
Was here.
"Eh... huh……?"
And, strangely enough, Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun didn't seem to notice it.
Even though a figure was standing right behind them, as if not paying any mind to it, they stepped inside the gymnasium.
As if they were moving together.
As if those three came here together.
With them being that close, I couldn't think otherwise.
To the point where I couldn't understand anything else, next to those two,
That girl wearing a yukata was there.
However, that wasn't the case.
Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun...
They hadn't noticed the presence of the girl in the yukata.
"A... Aikawa-san……? Moeta-kun……?"
I couldn't even put any power into the voice that called out to them.
What is it... this sensation.
This feeling... I know it.
Disgusting.
Frightening.

Scary.
Scary scary.
Scary scary scary.
But...
A tight, nostalgic feeling
Like when I met my sister.
Like when I met Kunagisa.
And... like when I met Kunagisa again.
That pain.
Even though it was painful...
I couldn't accept it.
I was currently having unacceptable emotions.
I was having absurd emotions.
Now,
That I was meeting her...
Meeting her.
What a thing.
If this is a bad dream, please don't wake me up.
"Then, now that the date is almost up, to my daughter's successor... **to my grandchild**, I will give my first order."
The fox-masked man said very perfunctorily.
"Can you hear me... my cute little fox..."

".....**Do as you like**."

That was the signal of the end.
The childish fox mask was wiped away.
The yukata was torn off.
And,
Those arms...
Towards Ishinagi Moeta,
And Aikawa Jun, they extended.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

I screamed.
I screamed as much as my voice could.
And finally, I understood.

That it hadn't ended.
That it had always continued.
And...
And the scene after that,
It ended to the point that it couldn't continue.
This was the end.
The end of the world...
The end of the Story.
There was no continuation, it was over.
I understood that from the bottom of my heart.

This was the Orange Seed.
The red alternative, Omokage Magokoro.

"Party" is the END.

Afterword

I don't want to make too livid a monologue so I will purposefully use an expression. Er, when you, like, briefly look back at your life, "the world is only filled with bad things, there hasn't been anything good in my life" is the most frank and honest impression, so I find it extremely unpleasant. Very unpleasant. Of course, without that we wouldn't keep living, so there might have been some happy things and some fun things. However, why only those memories easily become hazy is incredibly strange. No, not that. For example, *misfortune* is something that completes itself, so that leaves an impression. However, when we talk about *happiness*, it isn't something that ends itself, it is something that connects to the *future*. No matter how many happy or fun things there were in the past, if you are currently in *misfortune*, that *happiness* is, in the end, nothing more than a part of that *misfortune*. Maybe it's something like that. Looking at it from the other side, no matter how *happy* you are now, your past *misfortune* will never disappear. When you realize that it's a scar that will remain for eternity, you start to regret ever having thought of it from the other side.

I think that using misfortune as a spring to give life your all is, on the contrary, painful. But even then, if you really want to work hard towards something, you will have to face misfortune properly. If you do it carelessly, you'll surprisingly find yourself colluding with it, like "the miserable me is really miserable," and self-hatred and self-intoxication will get mixed in. Well, it's a common situation, but if you were to deny this, you would have no other choice than to use misfortune as a stepping stone. It's really not good to say "do your best" to someone who can't do their best, but if you tell them to, there will be people who won't be able to. So, even if it's a slow climb up the stairs, step by step, I think it'll surely be fine. Just like that, this has been *Uprooted Radical (Part One): The Thirteen Stairs*.

I feel like I have been in editor in-chief, Ooda Katsushi-sama's, and illustrator in-chief, Take-san's care for a long time, but now that I think of it, it's only been a few years. I am dumbfounded before that thick density. I will put an end to the Zaregoto Series after *Uprooted Radical (Part Two): Overkill Red vs. Orange Seed* and *Uprooted Radical (Part Three): The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User* following the third part, but even after that conclusion, I want to work with these two people again. The readers too, please accompany me as well. See you later.

Nisio Isin

西尾維新
NISIOISIN
UPROOTED RADICAL
2
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Nekosogi Radical (Second) Overkill
Red vs. The Orange Seed
Nisio Isin

Price: Physical 1080 yen (tax included)

"—Raise your hands and rejoice."
The fox-masked man appears before I, otherly known as the Nonsense User, and Humanity's last existence, The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.
Back Nozzle, Jail Alternative…
He, the worst onlooker of destiny, recites.
Are "this world's rules" the same thing as the "truth"!?
The long awaited second part to this three-part conclusive arc of the Zaregoto Series, where all the unpredictable thema brilliantly intertwine with each other! Complete combustion, Nisio Isin!!

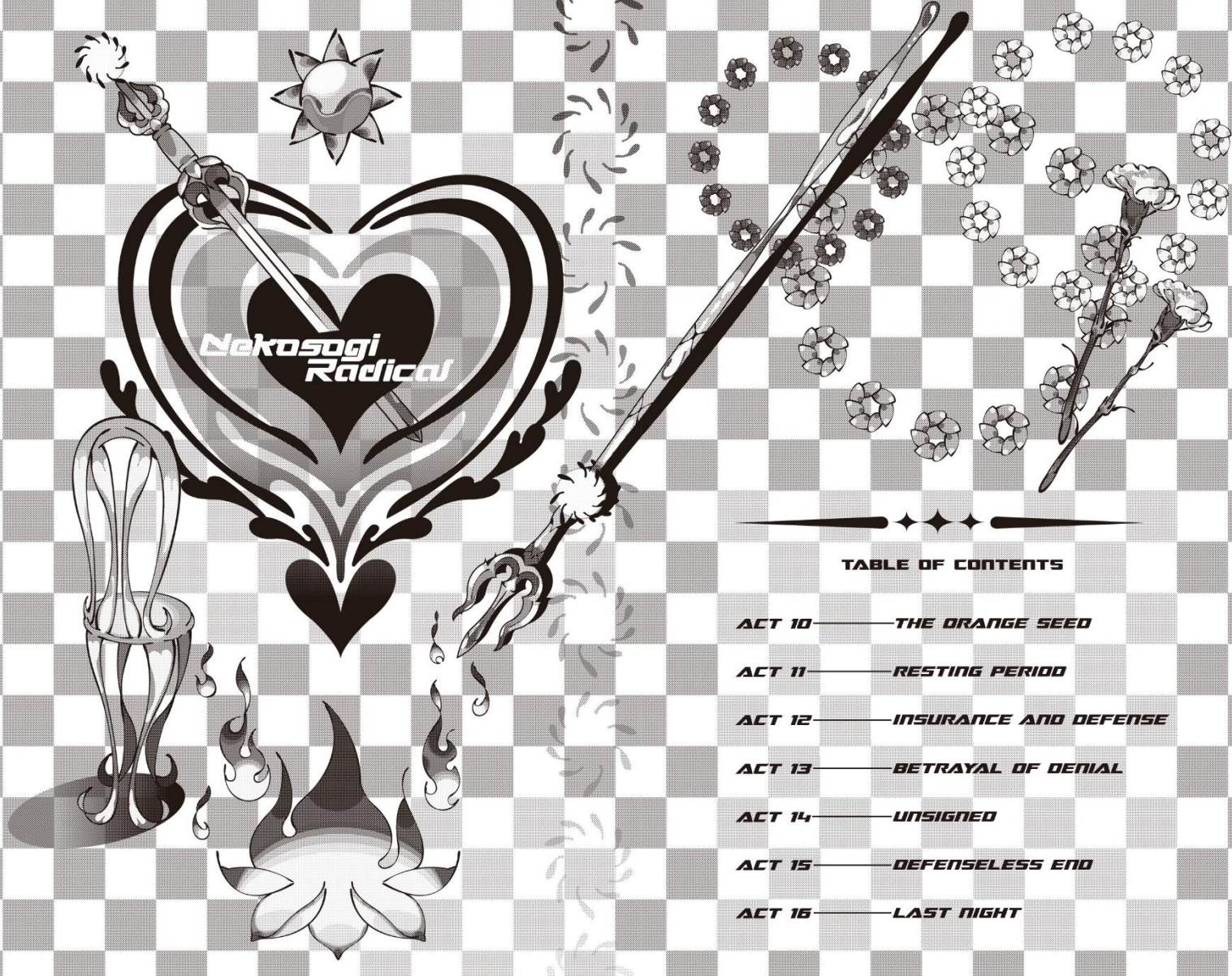


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACT 10 — THE ORANGE SEED 5
ACT 11 — RESTING PERIOD 55
ACT 12 — INSURANCE AND DEFENSE 90
ACT 13 — BETRAYAL OF DENIAL 120
ACT 14 — UNSIGNED 160
ACT 15 — DEFENSELESS END 195
ACT 16 — LAST NIGHT 250

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AKAGAMI IRIA	LADY
HANDA REI	HEAD MAID
CHIGA AKARI	ELDEST CHILD OF THE TRIPLET MAIDS
CHIGA HIKARI	MIDDLE CHILD OF THE TRIPLET MAIDS
CHIGA TERUKO	YOUNGEST CHILD OF THE TRIPLET MAIDS
IBUKI KANAMI	ARTIST
SASHIRONO YAYOI	COOK
HIMENA MAKI	FORTUNE-TELLER
SONOYAMA AKANE	ACADEMIC
SAKAKI SHINYA	ATTENDANT
ATEMIYA MUIMI	STUDENT
USAMI AKIHARU	STUDENT
EMOTO TOMOE	STUDENT
AOII MIKOKO	STUDENT
SASA SASAKI	DETECTIVE
IKARUGA KAZUHITO	DETECTIVE
SHISEI YUMA	ZIG ZAG
HAGIHARA SHIOGI	STRATEGIST
SAIJOU TAMAMO	INSATIABLE
ORIGAMI NOA	DIRECTOR
SHADOU KYOUICHIROU	RESEARCHER
OOGAKI SHITO	ASSISTANT
UZE MISACHI	SECRETARY
KOUTARI HINAYOSHI	RESEARCHER
NEO FURUARA	RESEARCHER
MIYOSHI KOKOROMI	RESEARCHER
KASUGAI KASUGA	RESEARCHER
UTSURIGI GAISUKE	GREEN GREEN GREEN
HINEMOSU SUZU	DOUBLE FLICK
GOTOOOROKI SEIGO	REVERSE CROSS
MUNEFUYU MUTSUKI	CUBIC LOOP
NADEKIRI HAKURAKU	DANCING WITH MADNESS
AYAMIINAMI HYOU	CHEETAH
SHIKIGISHI KISHIKI	BAD KING
SHIGAI TOUNO	TRIGGER HAPPY-END
KIGAMINE YAKU	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA	EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT
NIOUNOMIYA IZUMU	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NIOUNOMIYA RIZUMU	GREAT DETECTIVE
ASANO MIIKO	SWORDSWOMAN
YUKARIKI ICHIHIME	GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO	GIRL
ISHINAGI MOETA	GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU	DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI	WITCH
ISHIMARU KOUTA	GREAT THIEF
ZEROZAKI HITOSHIKI	DEMONIC KILLER
KAJOU AKIRA	SECOND
ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI	SPACE CREATOR
EMOTO SONOKI	DOCTOR
UTAGE KUDAN	AERIAL WEAPON
FURUYARI ZUKIN	SWORDSMITH
TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU	THOUGHT MANIPULATOR
MIGISHITA RURERO	PUPPETEER
YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU	ASSASSIN
MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NOISE	DISSONANCE
KINO RAICHI	POISON USER
OMOKAGE MAGOKORO	ORANGE SEED
SAITOU TAKASHI	WORST
AIKAWA JUN	RED
KUNAGISA TOMO	BLUE
ME (NARRATOR)	PROTAGONIST

ACT 10 - THE ORANGE SEED

0

It's party time.

1

Orange hair.

Orange braids as thick as rope reached down to her hips and were tied with a red band. Her bangs were brushed backwards to wildly expose her large and beautiful forehead.

Thick, strong-willed eyebrows.

Oddly defiant slanted eyes.

Sparkling orange pupils.

Abandoning her getas, barefoot.

Abandoning her yukata, leggings, and tight shirt.

A small stature.

An excessively small stature.

Limbs so thin they seemed like they would break if you touched them.

However, they were flexible.

Bent so much that they were roaring.

But they never broke.

A cat.

That figure reminiscent of a cat—

Omokage Magokoro.

"……!"

First — the closest one, Moeta-kun.

The one present where Magokoro's arm reached out was Moeta-kun.

Even though Magokoro had been behind them for a while, even though it seemed like they were all walking together, Moeta-kun turned back towards her with a confused expression, as if he had just finally noticed her. However, Ishinagi Moeta acted as one would expect from the Grim Reaper house. Judging that Magokoro's arm was going to strike at his center while still turning around, he opposed her by guarding his chest with both of his arms at a speed that can only be described as reflexive.

"How foolish."

The fox-masked man said beside me.

Certainly, it was probably foolish.

Judging from the result, that's all I could say.

If he could make a defensive move, then evading should have been possible too — rather, even though dodging should have been easier in this case, Moeta-kun didn't do that. Naturally, Moeta-kun had his own ideas, but in this case, no matter what ideas he may have had, the only correct course of action was to avoid it.

At least in this case, **there is no guarantee that you can defend yourself just because you took a defensive action**.

"—Moeta-kun!"

Crack.

Crack, *crack*...

The sound of breaking bones echoed from far away all the way over here.

However, it wasn't enough to stop the impact, and Moeta-kun's body was sent flying backwards. His legs parted from the gym floor and he was blasted away.

Through the air, at high speed.

I can only express it as being blasted away.

And further, in the spot he was blasted to—

Was Aikawa Jun.

Moeta-kun's body crashed into Aikawa-san.

It was so instantaneous.

It was so sudden.

Sudden enough that Aikawa-san couldn't react.

It shouldn't have been an unavoidable speed.

Even though the distance was close to zero, it shouldn't have been unavoidable.

Then, maybe she was simply surprised.

By the existence that blew Moeta-kun away...

Maybe there was something she felt.

Because.

That orange hair was.

For Aikawa Jun—

".....Wha!?"

Moeta-kun had crashed into Aikawa-san, but that wasn't the end of it. The shockwave didn't vanish with just that. It didn't stop. The two of them rolled further back, as if they were entangled. At this point they had stopped flying through the air, but without being able to get a grip on the gym floor, they banged into it here and there and didn't stop until they both hit their heads hard against the far end wall, making a loud noise.

After the crash, they stopped moving.

That shape.

It was as if... they had sunk into the wall.

".....Wh-what.....?"

What is that... that power?

It's not like she put that much force into it. She simply, as if separating some tall grass while moving through a forest, **mowed them down** with her arms.

With that... two humans.

A man and a woman, neither of whom can be said to be of small stature, with just one attack, she blasted away both Moeta-kun and Aikawa-san with pure power completely outside of common sense.

"Kukukuh."

The fox-masked man laughed.

"It's not something to be surprised about — the human body is packed with enough muscle to be able to pull off a stunt of that level from the start. Me, you, him, everyone. There is no exception. There is no real need to train, no need to forge yourself — we just don't know how to use it. We just don't have the proficiency to use it. We just don't have the need to use it. It's simply that we're just saving it. No, more than being saved, it may be the key itself."

"The key....."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to bring up some mundane story about how we only use thirty percent of our brains — what I mean here is literally the key. In other words, if you open the lock and crawl inside — **it's that simple**."

That simple.

That simple...

"Even I don't wish to open that locked room. Well, my mouth always gets slippery when **boasting about my relatives**, but now that I think about it, that sort of explanation was unnecessary for you, my enemy. After all..."

The fox-masked man said.

"**You were the one to open the lock**."

Stop... stop.

Don't say it.

Please don't say that.

Don't talk like you know anything.

Even though you don't know anything about us... and even if you did, I don't need you to tell me that.

I...

We...

Never intended to do that.

That kind of intention... we didn't have it.

"Well, since we're talking like this, maybe those *Killing Name* guys just have their locks left open. They're a careless bunch who don't lock their doors... right, Houko-chan? Isn't your *Eating One* exactly like that, Izumu?"

Turning back and looking at the spot next to me, the fox-masked man laughed again, "Kukukuh."

"Hmm. Quick as expected."

When I looked,

neither Izumu-kun nor Houko-chan were there.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Yamiguchi Houko.

Izumu-kun, who should have been behind me, and Houko-chan, who should have been beside me – before I had realized it, they had already rushed in.

Rushed in.

Already, they had jumped off the stage and were running towards Omokage Magokoro in a straight line without any wasted movements, pincering her from both sides.

Rapidly.

Swiftly.

Quickly.

From both sides, like a pincer.

Quickly, with the movements of a hunter.

"No... Nimbly, I should say."

"Houko-chan... Izumu-kun."

Wait.

Please wait.

No, don't.

She is...

She, Omokage Magokoro is...

Omokage Magokoro isn't an enemy.

Magokoro was... since before, always.

Never anyone's enemy.

Even though she was no one's enemy...

"This is interesting... very interesting." The fox-masked man said, sounding extremely bored. "Look closely, my enemy. This isn't the kind of thing you can see every day. It's an event that's normally impossible, fitting for the end of the world. A team up between the first and second ranks of the *Killing Names*; it's probably the first time in history that this has happened."

"You..."

I realized that my voice was trembling.

Scary.

Scary, scary.

I was afraid of this man, the fox-masked man.

"You... what you are doing, the kind of thing that you are doing here and now, do you understand?"

"I understand. I understand it all too well. I am a clump of self-awareness. **Unlike the you from before**, my enemy." The fox-masked man said smoothly. "It's fine, my enemy. Now look — don't miss it. The terrifying cooperation between the *Niounomiya* and the *Yamiguchi*..."

Those two...

Izumu-kun and Houko-chan seemingly jumped at Magokoro at the exact same time, but in reality, there was a very slight time lag between them.

Just a little.

Houko-chan was just slightly ahead.

It was an act called dispersion.

From the point of view of an amateur like me, it seems more advantageous to attack at the same time when in a battle of many against one — but in reality, by slightly delaying the attack, it makes the timing much more

difficult to measure for the receiving side. In other words, it is a gap to catch the enemy individually while in a group — nevertheless.

Pulling that off on the fly without any preparation is impressive, but in this case, it's the same as when Moeta-kun chose to block instead of dodge. Those two shouldn't have taken such a cunning move. It would have probably been better to simply strike at the same time.

Against someone to whom an instant is an eternity.

There is no other choice.

Houko-chan's arm was **dodged**.

Like rubber, or maybe like a fluid with high viscosity, in a movement so flexible it makes you sick just watching it, Magokoro lifted her leg high and, using it like a sickle, swung at the rushing Houko-chan's neck. Like that, she used Houko-chan's momentum to her advantage, without moving a single step — as a result, just by twisting her torso, she evaded Houko-chan's attack.

In that instant.

Houko-chan crashed cheek first onto the gymnasium floor.

She couldn't even absorb the shock with her hands.

It sounded like metal hitting against metal.

And.

The next instant.

Niounomiya Izumu's attack, which should originally have been delayed, **was perfectly on time** — and headed towards Magokoro.

Izumu-kun's face stiffened.

He couldn't stop now.

And it was the same.

Unlike Houko-chan, he attacked with his legs, but - with almost the same movement, Magokoro **parried** that leg and swung hers raised high towards Izumu-kun. With his original momentum and the movement of the leg pulling him, Izumu-kun hit the floor.

And, probably because of the surplus of momentum, Magokoro took two, then three steps forward and nearly fell, but...

Stopped.

Omokage Magokoro — was standing.

Even Ishinagi Moeta.

Even Aikawa Jun.

Even Yamiguchi Houko.

Even Niounomiya Izumu.

Among all of her collapsed opponents in the second gymnasium of Sumiyuri Academy, Omokage Magokoro alone was left standing.

"……."

It was nonsensical.

This kind of thing was impossible.

No matter what.

No matter what.

The Omokage Magokoro I knew — wasn't that nonsensical.

"Kukukuh… it's not something you see often. *Niounomiya* and *Yamiguchi* cooperating, and for that cooperation to break apart in an instant. It is fitting for the world's end."

"You…" With a tone filled with fear, I asked the fox-masked man. "What in the world did you use?"

" 'What did you use'. Hm. That doesn't make sense. It's a fine question for yourself, but for a question you want answered, you should be more concrete."

"She was…"

The Orange Seed.

Omokage Magokoro.

"**She was dead.**"

"……."

"Omokage Magokoro died in a conflagration — I confirmed that with my eyes. With my eyes, with these two eyeballs. She is not, this late, someone who can casually appear in a place like this."

" 'She is not someone who can casually appear'. Hm." The fox-masked man snorted a laugh. "You really don't know when to give up — this late, your way of thinking is outdated, my enemy. If you say she died, then I died too, and so did my daughter. **Something like the dead being alive** — at this point, it's trivial."

"……!"

The dead's…….. revival.

Living dead.

The fox-masked man added:

"Your line's nuance is different — the nuance is completely different, my enemy. For someone else, maybe, but as you said, she is a human who was dead to you. However, if this truly is Omokage Magokoro, you shouldn't

direct any blame towards me, my enemy. Rather— you should approve and rejoice. Shouldn't you thank me, my enemy? **Because the friend you thought dead is alive and well**."

"....."

"Approve and rejoice."

What a selfish thing to say.

Don't joke around.

Was it... really that simple?

It wasn't even something difficult.

That was blasphemy.

That was an insult.

Even if... even if, as the fox-masked man said, *destiny really* existed, that *a Story* or something like that existed in this world...

Wasn't this man the one ignoring it the most, the one toying with it the most?

Defying, insulting and scorning.

I couldn't think otherwise.

"....."

However...

I couldn't say anything.

I couldn't say anything else.

Why couldn't I say any more?

By doing that - wasn't that the same as accepting what the fox-masked man was saying?

I...

Was I rejoicing?

Or was I grieving?

Or was I angry?

I didn't know...

I didn't know my own feelings.

"Kukukuh..." The fox-masked man said. "More importantly, my enemy. Look, it's not totally over yet — the fight went smoothly, but isn't there one person who has received almost no damage?"

"Eh?"

Reverting my gaze from the fox-masked man...

Aikawa Jun was standing up.

After softly laying down Moeta-kun, whom she was holding, she stood in front of Magokoro, facing her.

Ah..... I see.

It's not that Aikawa-san couldn't avoid Moeta-kun. She was simply **protecting** Moeta-kun, who was blasted away after receiving Magokoro's attack. They didn't crash, she just buffered the shock. Then, rolling backwards too, it wasn't because she lost to the momentum, but judged that it would be better to roll.

Then...

Aikawa Jun received no damage.

"Hmm. As usual, you still haven't gotten rid of that softness, my daughter; well, not that I care about that, though."

"....."

"Now then. If I were to phrase it alluringly for entertainment's sake, this would be Humanity's Strongest versus the New Humanity's Strongest — I guess. That being said, my daughter doesn't fully know what she's fighting against..."

Aikawa-san... didn't avert her eyes?

She glared at Magokoro.

Of course, even though it was a surprise hit, she broke both of Moeta-kun's arms and blasted him away, while also managing to easily shatter the never before seen combination of *Niounomiya* and *Yamiguchi*. Against that existence, even Humanity's Strongest could not afford to be half-assed.

Also, more than that.

Aikawa-san should have been feeling something.

Towards the orange before her eyes, Omokage Magokoro.

Like the something I felt before Zerozaki Hitoshiki — Aikawa Jun should be feeling something before Omokage Magokoro.

Even if she didn't avoid Moeta-kun on purpose, against Magokoro, that feeling should have been stronger now.

As proof of that...

It seemed that Aikawa-san had completely failed to notice us on the distant stage. No, more than failing to notice, not being conscious of us would be more fitting.

Of me and...

Her father's existence, she was not conscious.

Instead, that consciousness,

was aimed only at the one in front of her.

".....**You — what are you?**"

Aikawa-san asked Magokoro in a low voice.

It felt like she was displeased and puzzled.

That was the first time I saw Aikawa-san like this.

And, probably, that was also the first time Aikawa-san experienced something like this.

And,

I wonder, for Magokoro...

Magokoro didn't react whatsoever.

To Aikawa-san's words, she didn't react.

Looking closely.

".....Eh?"

I let out a surprised voice.

"Kukuku..."

Magokoro was sleeping while standing.

Closing her eyes and occasionally dropping her jaw.

She was completely asleep — swaying as if on a boat.

"Anyhow, she just woke up, since she **was sleeping until just now** my guess is her consciousness is still not totally awake. I said that my daughter only partially understands things, but The Orange Seed — it seems she doesn't understand anything at all."

Slee... ping.

Sleeping.

She — Magokoro, while asleep, kicked the butts of three *Killing Names*?

That was more than nonsensical, it was absurd.

The power balance had completely collapsed.

Like inflation.

An action that could collapse all causality up until now.

That, that would be too...

No, it wasn't.

It wasn't that.

In the first place.

In the first place — that's how it was designed.

Wasn't the concept of the Orange Seed created solely for that purpose?

Just like when the fox-masked man previously created the Red, who would later come to be called Humanity's Strongest Contractor, alongside his

two colleagues, Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya, it was under the directive of collapsing causality and achieving the world's end.

Sleeping.

Sleeping.

Omokage Magokoro was... sleeping.

"**If you wanna sleep that much—**"

Aikawa-san moved.

"**—then sleep for the rest of your life!**"

That instant.

The moment she was yelled at by Aikawa-san—

Omokage Magokoro opened her eyes.

Her orange pupils—

locked onto Aikawa-san.

They focused.

Their eyes — they met.

"Ah."

And then, a moment I would probably never forget arrived.

An instant that you might miss if you blinked?

At this point, I couldn’t predict how the world and the story would roll, accelerate, converge, or end in the future at the hands of the fox-masked man, the Worst.

But no matter how it happened.

It was almost irrelevant.

This was the climax.

Aikawa Jun was the one to collapse.

Really — a moment, an instant.

Aikawa-san tried to jump on Magokoro, she tried to go in a straight line, stepping hard with her left foot — before the other foot's heel could part from the gymnasium floor, it had already been settled.

In that instant, Magokoro was in reach of Aikawa-san.

She moved — no, it wasn't something like that.

Even though I didn't take my eyes off her, even though I don't think I took my eyes off her, Magokoro was standing in front of Aikawa-san with a fist made by joining both hands, raised.

And, she swung down that fist.

On the head.

She hammered it around where the temple is.

Without being able to step whatsoever —

Aikawa-san's whole body collapsed on the floor.

Because of the shock's reflection, her body rose back once more, however, in the end it was just a reflection. She soon returned to the floor, not rising up again.

She didn't rise up.

She didn't even budge.

"Aikawa—san."

"Hm."

The fox-masked man said, looking extremely bored.

Rather than being disappointed, it seemed as if it was predestined harmony to him.

"Well, in the end, she's outdated — if an antique goes to the front line, that's what happens. I had a tiny sliver of expectation, but it ended up useless. No matter how much praise it may receive, an antique is an antique, huh? Good grief. That sure was brief."

"……!"

Magokoro was—

as if it was nothing, with her orange eyes, looking down at Aikawa-san, who was laying face down.

Looking down at Aikawa-san who wasn't budging.

"Looks like she's dead — good grief, she's dead without a doubt. Mm. No, she's just barely alive? But, well, at least one of her eyes was crushed."

The fox-masked man spoke indifferently about his own daughter.

And in that — I felt something repulsive.

Like something clinging onto me.

"You… you, in this situation, faced with this situation, even in a situation like this — don't you have anything else to say?"

"Hm. Something else to say, huh? Unfortunately, my vocabulary isn't really that abundant, however, certainly, having the daughter that I created be defeated by the granddaughter that I also created, now that I think about it, is somewhat of a complex situation. I do *not* feel any regret…"

"……"

"Don't make a face that's unlike you, my enemy. Calm down, calm down and cool off, my enemy. Also, from your perspective, it may be peculiar to see

my daughter lying on the ground like that — but for me, it's something I saw enough times to get bored of it ten years ago. 'What, so she hasn't changed', it's just something of that level. If you want to talk about a rare occurrence, I guess the combination of *Niounomiya* and *Yamiguchi* is..."

".....what do you mean?"

I asked the fox-masked man.

"The Omokage Magokoro I knew — she wasn't that nonsensical, that absurd, that bottomless."

"Hm. What are you trying to say?"

"**You — what did you do to Magokoro?**"

"I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything, nothing at all. Don't misunderstand me, don't misunderstand me. At the very least, I didn't do what you're thinking, what you're imagining. Even if something was done, I wasn't the one to do it."

"Not... you?"

"Rather."

The fox-masked man chose his words.

"Rather — the opposite?"

".....? That's, what do..."

"Oops. My enemy, this is not the moment to engage in idle gossip. My enemy, it seems that Magokoro wants to put an end..."

Looking back—

Magokoro was stepping on Aikawa's head who probably had not an ounce of consciousness left.

She didn't seem to put that much power, just supporting the back of her foot on her temporal region, it felt like it was just placed — even then, if **that Magokoro** felt like it, she could easily smash a human head.

It was bad.

It was no good.

The current Magokoro — I couldn't stop her.

There was no scabbard for that blade.

There was no brake for that accelerator pedal.

There was no brake for that acceleration...

I was not there for her.

Aimlessly.

As I was about to unconsciously descend from the stage —
the fox-masked man stopped me.
"Hold on, my enemy. Where are you intending to go?"
"Where..."
It was obvious.
I had to go.
I had to rush over.
I had to be there.
"If it's for your reunion greetings, hold on just a bit more — me too, I still haven't said a word to my daughter either. Hm. I wonder if her consciousness is ever gonna come back..... well, I don't care either way. More importantly, my enemy—"
The fox-masked man said.
"-—it seems there's one more disturbance."
"Eh.....?"
"As expected of the *Man Eater* — the Niounomiya Troupe's worst failed creation. Even if his speciality is to eat, he won't get eaten easily, huh?"
"—Izumu-kun."
Niounomiya Izumu — was standing up.
Blood flowed from his forehead.
His legs were somewhat shaky.
But his eyes clearly possessed a powerful will.
He was looking at Omokage Magokoro.
"Yamiguchi Houko-chan ate the same move an instant before, so he was able to prepare himself. Even if he couldn't withstand the hit, he was ready to hit the floor. So it reduced the damage to the minimum, huh? Hm. Really, when it comes to battles, he is undeniably a genius — when it comes to just battles, he probably far exceeds my daughter." The fox-masked man expressed his admiration honestly. "However, I wonder about waking up now — in that exchange from earlier, you must have understood that you can't win against the Orange. Foolish."
"Foolish, you say..."
"In the end, he is lacking half of himself. If Rizumu, in charge of managing the weakness, was still there, he could bear to lose and retreat— hm. It seems that Izumu, in charge of managing the strength, cannot admit defeat. It looks like he couldn't overcome this weak point, even after facing my daughter."
"Uh—"

When I was about to descend off the stage nonetheless, the fox-masked man grabbed my wrist and physically stopped me.

He wasn't that strong.

However — I couldn't shake him off.

I couldn't seem to be able to shake him off.

"Don't go."

The fox-masked man put some strength in his voice.

"You can't go."

"But, like that—"

"Don't worry, just don't go. Don't go. I won't tolerate you bothering Izumu. We should continue to just shut up and watch. I know more about Izumu than you, my enemy."

"....."

I wonder, Izumu-kun...

Clenching his fists and his teeth.

Glaring at Omokage Magokoro.

"**You—**"

And Izumu-kun opened his mouth.

"**—move that filthy foot from there**."

Saying that, Izumu-kun pointed at Magokoro's foot stepping on Aikawa-san.

"Move — don't you get that you should move that foot, bastard? Aahn? Can't you hear me?"

Magokoro...

Didn't respond.

Not one reaction.

As if she couldn't hear him, she didn't move.

She didn't even look at Izumu-kun.

Just Aikawa-san.

As if **there was something she couldn't accept**, she was looking at Aikawa-san with her orange eyes.

Rather than looking — was she observing?

No.

She was confirming.

She was gazing as if confirming something.

"....."

—I didn't get it.

I couldn't read Magokoro's expression at all.

Now, what was she thinking, I didn't get it.

There was also the problem of distance, but...

No, it wasn't that.

Between me and Magokoro, there was no distance.

Even then.

I couldn't read it.

I couldn't see it.

I couldn't reach it.

What is it Magokoro?

What happened to you?

What in the world happened to you?

It was abnormal.

As if different.

You were...

You weren't that kind of person, right?

"Don't just ignore me, bastard!!"

Izumu-kun was enraged.

It was bad — this was bad!

Last month, no, since a new day began, the month also changed, so it's like two months ago!

At that time, Izumu could easily suppress me with his massive amounts of destructive power, but then too, **he got irritated**, which is why I'm still alive.

As the fox-masked man said — that was a weakness.

It was a weak point.

Niounomiya Izumu's weak point.

The weakness of the *Man Eater* without weakness.

"Rhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh-- FEASTING!!"

Raising his abnormally long arms above his head.

Spreading out his hands like a peacock.

Getting just one step closer, he danced in the air.

Eating One.

Niounomiya Izumu's secret technique, his trump card.

Right off the bat, he released it with both arms.

Without mercy.

If you looked only at the movement, it was just a slap.

But that power could easily crush concrete with just one hand. Using both hands, he could probably completely erase one child from this world, a literal one-hit surefire technique.

The one-hit surefire technique of someone who had completely opened their door.

However.

He was not Omokage Magokoro's enemy.

Right...

Magokoro was no one's enemy.

Unchallenged and undefeated.

The last of the last, remaining until the end of the end...

The only one left at the last end.

Therefore — the Last.

Not the Strongest nor the Worst — the Last.

Humanity's Last, the Orange Seed!

"*Eating One*, huh — though it's a good technique. Though it's a really good technique. Though it is a technique that even I, Humanity's Worst, dread, that makes me shiver to the very bottom of my heart — even then, now that he is lacking Rizumu, its power will clearly drop." The fox-masked man said. "That kind of big move isn't something to casually pull out again and again — it's a trump card precisely because you take it out at the right time. Whether you do it with one hand or with two, the span of time between the start and the end is too long."

In reality — that was correct.

However.

However, at the very least, Izumu-kun's wish came true.

It went as Izumu-kun predicted.

Magokoro took her foot off of Aikawa-san.

She took her sole off of Aikawa-san's head.

And next.

In the next instant.

Omokage Magokoro was stepping on Izumu-kun.

She had moved in close range to Izumu-kun.

This time, it was the opposite of earlier.
She didn't parry like earlier.
She didn't dodge like earlier.
She didn't divert like earlier.
From the front.
Against Izumu-kun who tried to get in front of the front,
she went even further in front.
She released one blow against Izumu-kun's chest, which was completely unprotected due to his raised arms.
Only using brute force,
she released one blow.
"----------!"
The right side of the torso.
The right side of the torso... became **uprooted**.
Even though it was happening in front of me, I couldn't understand that phenomenon.
For a human body... to be destroyed by a human hand.
It wasn't even a one-hit surefire technique.
Just a strike.
Just a simple strike using her strength.
Lacking any technique or tactics.
But, even then...
It had the same power, the same destructive force as Izumu-kun's *Eating One*.
Niounomiya Izumu had completely lost balance by having his chest gouged out. But even then, he was no longer at a point where he could stop his *Eating One*, which had already accelerated — he unleashed his arms in the wrong direction, and, being pathetically pulled by the inertia of his own move,
he collapsed.
The second fall.
An inevitable fall.
However — this time, he wouldn't get up again.
Sliding on the gymnasium's floor,
slipping on the gymnasium's floor,
blood,
flesh,

and organs,

Spilling.

He didn't move.

He didn't move.

He didn't move — anymore...

"Hm."

The fox-masked man — he looked on with cold eyes.

"**With this, you finally were able to lose**. Izumu — it seems my daughter wasn't able to completely let you lose. My daughter really really really hasn't changed at all since ten years ago. She's soft........ Her endgame, her personality, everything. It must have been a real pain from your perspective; how irritating errors in calculation are. However, with that, being the one who failed to die last month — your Back Nozzle is finally completed."

"Kuh... y-you."

This guy — was he really a human?

Was that a human?

How could those be the words of a human?

As if... he was a human failure.

Magokoro...

Magokoro briefly looked at her surroundings.

Surroundings...

Sumiyuri Academy's second gymnasium.

This time, only Magokoro was standing.

Just her.

"........................."

Then, Magokoro opened her mouth widely and —

"Gerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragera gerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerag erageragerageragerageragerageragera!"

—she laughed loudly.

Loudly,

ferociously,

and savagely.

Like a muddy stream gulping down everything, she laughed.

"That's fine," the fox-masked man said, "the superior entity must put aside any kind of events and first laugh — joy and anger and grief and fun, happenings and defenses and failures and conclusions don't matter — first

laugh, laugh loudly, laugh and laugh and laugh and go crazy, Omokage Magokoro."

Omokage Magokoro's laughter — it didn't stop.
Along with a dark exhilaration.
And orange,
Disheveling her orange hair,
she laughed.
Laughing crazily.
"Now— "
I — I screamed.
As Magokoro's scabbard.
As Magokoro's limiter.
Magokoro's...
I was Magokoro's...
"**—You can stop now, Magokoro!**"
Instantly.
Finally, I should say.
Omokage Magokoro looked **this way**.
At the fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi,
and at me, on top of the gymnasium's stage.
Then, Magokoro —
for the first time, she showed a real expression.
A mysterious one.
Then — a surprised expression.
She wasn't looking at the fox-masked man.
But at me.
At me.
Magokoro said.

"Ii-chan."

However, that was all.
Then, Magokoro,
as if her battery ran out.
Crumbled.
Crumbled was the right word, there was no other way to express it.
As if her knees came loose,

as if her heart suddenly stopped,
like the other four—
she collapsed face first on the gymnasium's floor.
And...
Didn't move.
Like the other four,
she didn't move.
"Ma-Magokoro!?"
"Don't panic, don't rush, don't be flustered — this is also merely a predestined harmony. Hm. No... maybe it was a bit late."
"Mi-mister fox?"
"My enemy. Do you think I would make a monster like her my subordinate without any restrictions — without a brake, without a scabbard, and more importantly, without you? I already learned my lesson when I died ten years ago."
Ten years ago...
Aikawa-san, huh?
"*Thirteen Stairs*."
The fox-masked man matter-of-factly, not explaining anything, bluntly said.
"Originally, *Thirteen Stairs* wasn't built with a grand objective in mind. I was just gathering people with enough existential power to influence the Story — in other words, **the main cast**. It was just a group resulting from that, however, ever since you became my enemy, that objective changed. Their new goal is divided in two. First, is to confront you. With Noise as the representative, the Miotsukushi Sisters, Misora and Takami, as well as Yamiguchi Nureginu and Furuyari Zukin, were chosen for that objective."
Though Zukin should be counted as an exception, the fox-masked man added.
"And the other objective, rather, the most pressing duty, the control of the one who cannot be removed from our destiny, the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro."
"....."
Control.
Brake.
Scabbard.

"The ones chosen for that objective are Tokinomiya Jikoku, Kino Raichi... and, the one over there, Migishita Rurero."

The fox-masked man pointed to the other side of the iron door where the masked Magokoro, Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun came through.

A woman was there.

How should I say it...

At first glance, she had an appearance that made you think.

Bandages wrapped all over her body.

Gauze and tape.

Plaster, a corset, and a crutch.

And her arms and her leg,

scars all over her body.

Maybe to change her bandages more easily, her clothes were very simple, almost like she was only wearing bandages.

Drawing a curve only possible for a woman, more than just pretty, I felt like the word 'beautiful' fit her more. The bandages and gauzes against her bodyline, similar to an automobile optimised for speed, were so painfully erotic that I unconsciously swallowed my words.

An eyepatch on her right eye.

Only her left eye could be seen.

She was wearing glasses without rims.

"Aah, I will tell you just in case, but don't misunderstand, my enemy — though it probably can't be helped, since you already seem to have met Sonoki, but Rurero didn’t dress like this for cosplay — she just got a bit hurt training Magokoro."

"Tr..... training?"

Migishita Rurero...

So that's Migishita Rurero?

If I remember correctly, Migishita Rurero's title was...

Her title was Puppeteer.

Puppet.

Puppet...?

"Yo, Rurero — you're a bit late."

"Is that so... that's my bad. Unlike Jikoku, I don't have any particular obsession with time, you see."

Rurero-san answered vulgarly.

Without displaying any particular emotion, she looked around the gymnasium.

Including Magokoro, there were five people on the floor.

Moeta-kun, Aikawa-san, Houko-chan, Izumu-kun, and Magokoro, looking at them in order...

She sighed from the bottom of her heart.

She seemed listless.

It was bizarre, coupled with her bandaged appearance.

"What about Sonoki? Didn't you bring her here?"

"Who knows. I wonder where she went. I searched more or less, but I didn't meet her — I don't know about anything else other than my puppets."

"Is that so. Can't be helped then."

The fox-masked man took out a cellphone from his sleeve.

.....

Hey, so he had one, a cellphone.....

It didn't fit him.....

"I won't tell you my number."

The fox-masked man glanced at me and said so.

.....

Though he'd probably found mine out anyway.

Assistant professor Kigamine knew it too.

The fox-masked man inputted an eleven digit number swiftly.

"Yo, Sonoki. The second gymnasium is filled with injured people."

He said, and then hung up the phone.

Even though the other side picked up, it didn't feel like a conversation. It was very business-like. To be fair, if he's going to deal with Emoto-san, that might have been the best way to handle it.....

"Now, my enemy. It's fine now."

".....?"

"Quickly — with haste, go rush to someone's side. Will it be my daughter that you trust so much, or maybe your beloved Houko-chan? Maybe Magokoro that you met for the first time in a few years? Or maybe, since it'll be your last chance to see him before he parts from this world, Niounomiya Izumu?"

".....!"

I jumped off the stage.

Landed, and ran without leaving a moment to think.

It irritated me — that way of saying it really irritated me.

However, just in that instance, he was completely right.

Now,

no matter what, the obvious choice now was Niounomiya Izumu.

Izumu-kun... it was bad.

His degree of **collapse** was different from the other four.

His guts were leaking out.

His blood, flesh, and organs were leaking equally.

It was much more than a fatal wound.

The small and trivial wound on my chest couldn't be compared to it — this was an overwhelmingly fatal wound.

The situation was different from two months ago.

Two months ago, his heart was gouged out and his neck was cut, but he still managed to survive. That was the frightening power of a Niounomiya — however, as compensation, the *little sister* personality of the Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic was lost, and only the *big brother* was left.

Rizumu-chan disappeared and Izumu-kun was left.

However,

this month, there was no compensation.

So he had to die.

Immortal and indestructible... such terms don't exist in this world.

That girl...

That immortal girl, even Madoka Kuchiha died.

Whether you are immortal or not it’s the same — if you're killed, you die.

Izumu-kun...

Izumu-kun, Izumu-kun, Izumu-kun...

"Izumu-kun!"

For about five seconds, I ran without taking a single breath, eventually reaching the spot where Izumu-kun was. Without even thinking about avoiding Izumu-kun's blood and flesh that was sprayed around, in a straight line, through the shortest distance possible, I rushed to his side.

Holding the facedown Izumu-kun, I flipped him around.

Izumu-kun was...

Still not dead.

Still living.

There was consciousness in his opened eyes.

However, that was.

That was just a still.
Rather than still being alive—
he was just alive *for now*.
Even if he had consciousness, he had no will.
Nor a mind.
His breath was faint.
He was not breathing. He was groaning painfully.
"Ah.....ah, ah."
His breathless groaning — it couldn't form words.
"I..... Izumu-kun!"
"What a face you're making..... that's pathetic, Onii-san — is that the face of the man my cute little sister fell for....."
"Don-don't speak! Now, now, Emoto-san will come, so— "
Will come, so?
Will come, so — so what?
What would happen?
Would she tie Izumu-kun's sprayed organs together?
No matter what kind of doctor Emoto-san was...
There was no way she could do that.
"Ah..... that's— " Izumu-kun probably understood that himself and without paying any mind to me, he continued. "That's, what, Onii-san's friend? Err, the orange, that nonsensical one....."
"Ra, rather than a friend— "
I couldn't answer.
I didn't get it.
What exactly — she was.
Omokage Magokoro was certainly my colleague when I was a student of the ER3 Program during my time in America, however, she wasn't like this.
It’s as if it was another person.
But... however...
When she called me, in that moment.
Just in that instant.
Certainly — that was Magokoro.
The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.
"I lost... huh?"
Izumu-kun said with an emotional tone.
Of course he had things to think about.

On this point, as the person in question said, the fox-masked man understood Izumu-kun better than me.

However, even then.

Even then...

"Mi-mister fox, what happened to him?"

"Th, that person..."

"Keh..... I'm sure that, for that guy, whether someone like me lives or dies — it's the same thing."

"....."

"That pisses me off too..... then, I can't be saved..... so, for this poor me, at the end, at the end of the end, I gotta go all out — and get my revenge."

So that my death can have meaning.

Saying that, Izumu-kun suddenly,

with his long arms, he grabbed me.

Probably using the last of his strength.

Enlacing me, he clang to me.

And,

approaching my ear,

"**Zerozaki Hitoshiki is alive**."

He said that line.

"....."

"Kiss."

While caressing my cheek with his lips,

Izumu-kun's arms loosened.

It really was... the last of his strength.

Just like that, as if my arms couldn't stop it, like a fire being put out, like a drop of water hitting the floor — his long arms spread out and fell.

"Ah..... what—"

Niounomiya Izumu,

hazily, with his pupils having lost most of their clarity,

Looked up at the air.

"So you were there... Rizumu."

His last words — they were his little sister's name.

Many people perished, and one of the few survivors of that August case, Niounomiya Izumu...

Here, has died.

Two months late — he finally died.

Back Nozzle...

That phenomenon — so that's what is was?

If that's the case, that thing — I can only say it's the worst.

It's scary.

Far too... scary.

Ultimately, the one currently confronting me with malice wasn't the fox-masked man — it was the world and the Story. I realized that from the bottom of my heart. It was scary.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Also, Niounomiya Rizumu.

The Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic.

"Kukukuh."

Behind my back, the sound of laughter could be heard.

When I turned to glare.

The fox-masked man was there.

"Perhaps it's the first time someone died in your arms, my enemy — a different feeling than simply hearing about the result or discovering the corpse, isn't it?"

".....if it's someone dying in front of me, it has happened."

"But not in your arms, right?"

"....."

Kukukuh, the fox-masked man laughed.

On his right shoulder,

he was carrying Aikawa Jun.

Like he was lending her his shoulder.

Aikawa-san's eyes — they were closed.

Her consciousness hadn't returned.

She wasn't bleeding, however, I often heard that it was worse to not be bleeding after an attack to the head. It seemed that she wasn't dead, but that didn't put me at ease. I wondered... would she be fine?

However, even more than those worries, the fox-masked man lending a shoulder to Aikawa-san, that scene made me feel a certain discomfort. Of course, it wasn't that there was anything wrong with their appearances. Aikawa-san was quite tall, but the fox-masked man, while being thin as a

threat, was taller than Aikawa-san. I thought he wouldn't be able to carry her on his shoulder, but he was doing it so indifferently, naturally.

Naturally.

Like father and daughter.

That naturalness — it was the source of the discomfort.

An abnormal sense of discomfort.

"My enemy with that — **this party** is over. After this, you can scatter in small groups, there won't be an afterparty. If you wait a bit, Sonoki will gladly rush over, so each of them will receive treatment. Of course, not only for that Grim Reaper and Houko-chan, but you too, my enemy. You use your body a little too roughly — so do be careful. I'm not saying that as an enemy, but as a simple warning of common sense. It doesn't look like you acted particularly wildly this time, but any injury can be deadly, so at least get that wound on your chest checked."

"So you — you noticed?"

"Of course I did. There's no way I wouldn't catch on to how you were walking and protecting your chest — that much, you can ascertain even without being Sonoki."

"....."

Even then, while knowing that, he advised me to run.....? Rather than nonsensical or absurd, he might be more so.

No, that's definitely the case.

He's the Worst...

Humanity's Worst.

Ah, right.

Magokoro.

"Magokoro— "

"Magokoro-chan is this way."

Getting close to the fox-masked man,

carrying Magokoro with her hands and looking inconvenienced by her crutch — Migishita Rurero entered my field of vision.

Rurero-san.

Rurero-san looked at me.

Looking awfully interested.

"Nice to meet you, *Ii-chan*."

"....."

"I'm Migishita Rurero — the seventh of *Thirteen Stairs*."

Rurero-san said.

"Nice to meet you. Though we are enemies, since it's our first meeting, you don't have to behave this curtly."

".....yes. Nice to meet you, Rurero-san."

"I generally operate behind the scenes, so I thought I wouldn't get to meet you,however, I see. Setting apart what the other *Thirteen Stairs* think, looking at you, I can clearly understand why mister fox chose you to be his enemy."

Rurero-san said.

"**With this body, I understand well**."

".....you... to Magokoro..."

To Magokoro — what did you do, I wanted to ask.

Training.

The fox-masked man used that word.

Puppet.

Being a puppeteer — that was her role.

And, **rather, flipping it upside down**, the meaning of those significant words:

Migishita Rurero.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Kino Raichi.

Looking at these three together,

The answer appears by itself.

If it were to appear, I didn't want to ask.

That answer — I didn't want to hear it.

"Kukukuh." As if reading my thoughts, the fox-masked man giggled. "Then, we will temporarily excuse ourselves from here. Looking at the time, we will contact you from our side. Wait silently for direct contact from me, my enemy. It's October. September ended and it's October now — the October I hate so much has come around this year too. Each and every year, faithfully. I swear, what might happen, I can't restrain my anticipation! However, my enemy, you must rest first. Heal that body as much as you can. Take care of yourself with all your might."

"....mister, fox."

"And, though it's obvious in Magokoro's case, I will also take my daughter — I will take her with me. Though it has no relation to the Story, she has some tales I don't want others to hear."

"....."

"Be at ease, I won't make that antique my ally at this point — if I had to say, she's more interesting as an enemy. It's more interesting for you to have her as your card. That's what I think, my enemy. But try to be in my place. I was killed by her ten years ago. I just want to casually tell her some resentful words."

"....."

Resentful words...

Even though there's no way the fox-masked man had any of those.

What was he planning?

What was he trying to do to Aikawa-san?

What more was he trying to do?

"The *Thirteen Stairs* and I will leave this Sumiyuri Academy today — our reason for being here is gone. It's not like I don't have any regrets, but, well, it's the same either way — we will now go around to other places. Well then—"

The fox-masked man briefly took his mask off.

And flashed me a smile with his true face.

"Ciao, my enemy."

And with that,

he turned his back to me.

"I swear... what a rude person. Saying whatever he wants. I wonder if he ever thinks about the trouble he's causing to everyone around him? Ah, mmm, well then, *Ii-chan*. I'll probably never meet you again. Well, try to do your best."

Saying that, Migishita Rurero followed after him.

Naturally, Omokage Magokoro, carried by Rurero-san, and Aikawa Jun, carried by the fox-masked man, left this second gymnasium too.

Inside the dim gymnasium.

Only I was left.

Clang.

Clang, clang.

Clang, clang, clang.

Even though there was no clock anywhere around, I felt like I was hearing the sound of time being carved.

Only time was progressing.

Now, nothing would happen.

Nothing would happen.

"....."

Aikawa Jun.
Saitou Takashi.
Omokage Magokoro.
Humanity's Strongest, Humanity's Worst and Humanity's Last.
Certainly, it was the end.
This was the end.
What else, other than the end, could this be?
But, even then.
It looked like it wouldn't be the end.

2

When Emoto-san arrived in a rush to the second gymnasium, with a smile that made you wonder if the muscles of your face could even be shaped that way, Moeta-kun and Houko-chan began to regain consciousness.

Houko-chan just had a cut on her forehead. Like the Miotsukushi Sisters, she only had a light concussion.

After promptly doing emergency treatment, Emoto-san said "I was just called by mister fox, so....." and left the gymnasium. It seemed that mister fox called her again after leaving the gymnasium. It was probably to treat Aikawa-san and Magokoro. Whether Magokoro even needed any treatment, I didn't know.

Before she left, Emoto-san was,

"....."

In silence, she was looking at Izumu-kun.

I thought she would cry, but she didn't.

And then she told us "I think Konomi-chan will deal with it, so leave Izumu-kun like that."

She didn't cry.

But she seemed sadder than ever before.

Returning to the main subject,

Well, essentially, Moeta-kun and Houko-chan didn't have as many injuries as I was worried about, so that was a relief.

Cleats for Moeta-kun's arms.

A gauze for Houko-chan's forehead.

That level of damage.

Looking at everything at once —it was minimal.

Treating Aikawa-san and Izumu-kun as irregular participants, we, Houko-chan, Moeta-kun, and I, the residents from the apartment, didn't suffer a single loss — we also obtained the antidote for Miiko-san's disease.

Of course,

even if the wounds on our bodies were light,

in this case, the wounds on our mind —they were much deeper.

Too much.

Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta.

Obviously, when they were in treatment it could be excused, but even after they regained consciousness, they hadn't said a word.

They were obstinately silent.

Not only the normally talkative Moeta-kun, but even more so Houko-chan, who didn't even try to look me in the eye. Trying to cheer them up, I told them how, after reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, wanting to read another book from the same author, I read *Tooth and Nails* and finished it without even realizing, but even those charming tales of my youth had no effect.

.....

At the beginning there's a moment just like this, in that book.

So — well, that also applies to me in the end — humans can't stay forever at the same place.

Since Emoto-san only did emergency treatment, Houko-chan and Moeta-kun would have to go to the hospital to receive real treatment, and also to deliver Miiko-san's antidote.

We had to go home.

There were no enemies here anymore.

To put it like the fox-masked man would:

This place was already finished.

Finished.

It lost all meaning.

And, for the time being, since Aikawa-san's car, with which we came to this Sumiyuri Academy, can no longer move due to *the accident*, we didn't have any means of transport — when the three of us decided to go back, I finally realized that.

I realized that, and it couldn't be helped.

We couldn't do anything about it.

There's no way we could've called a taxi or an ambulance, since the situation was what it was.

So we had no choice other than to walk.

In the end, we only stayed at the academy for a few hours, making the current time a bit past one in the morning — when we arrive back to civilization, it would probably be time for the buses and trains to start moving.

Though that was an optimistic prediction.

I thought it might have been hard for the two injured to walk, but they didn't look like they couldn't handle it.

During that time too, they didn't speak to me.

Maybe they didn't care.

Thinking about it, I don't really know for Moeta-kun, but at the very least, for Houko-chan, this was her first battle.

It was a painful result, right?

Since words of comfort were probably meaningless, I stayed silent and, eventually, the sky having lit up, we somehow managed to reach civilization. Until we found a train station, among us, there was no conversation. Though I said civilization, it was an incredibly rural area, so the diagram was a straight line for a few hours. But even then, a train was a train. Switching to the subway at a random station, we would go directly to the hospital where Miiko-san was. Since I snuck out of that hospital (and Rabumi-san probably didn't do any follow up), like Houko-chan and Moeta-kun, I would be hospitalized — rehospitalized.

Anyway, our legs were stiff.

As expected of *Killing Names*, Houko-chan and Moeta-kun didn't look tired at all, but for an amateur like me, walking from Sumiyuri Academy all the way to this station was harsh. However, there were no seats in this countryside station, so when the train arrived after a few dozen minutes, the three of us took our seats, lined up and spent our time.

Idly.

Meaninglessly.

Each of us had things to think about.

What I thought about was,

naturally, Omokage Magokoro.

Happy to meet her again, surprised to see her again — that would be somewhat lacking in emotion, but now that we are far from that academy **why after all this time**, is the thought that crossed my mind first.

Why after all this time?

Why... was Magokoro there?

In the world of the living?

Even though she... she should have died.

Even though she died.

Even though it was like I killed her.

Even though I killed her.

No — it's as the fox-masked man said, at this point, after all of that, people's lives and deaths may be surprisingly simple topics.

Like a mystery novel to trick kids, dying and coming back to life and, in fact, not having been dead at all and the first victim being the culprit, maybe it's a problem of that degree.

Even until now, it's been similar to that.

It was like that.

What's up with this, after all that happened?

Orange hair.

A beautiful forehead.

Thick eyebrows.

Slanted eyes.

As if... never changing.

That child-like stature too.

That stature was... **similar to Kunagisa Tomo's** too.

And... it was burned into my eyes.

No matter what the fox-masked man may have said, for me it was absolute. Humanity's Strongest Contractor, Aikawa Jun — the scene of her being broken in one blow.

I wonder... What does that mean?

Magokoro was certainly outstanding in all aspects, encompassing all sorts of talents. However, regardless of all that — that power, she didn't have that much power.

Magokoro.

What in the world happened to you?

"Ii-nii."

Eventually,

after a really long time, Moeta-kun's mouth opened.

"After saying all those grandiose things, I wasn't able to be of any use — I can only apologize."

"Ah, no — that's not....."

"Houko too, stop sulking forever and apologize to Ii-nii."

"....."

Houko-chan chose to stay silent for a while, even after that, but she eventually looked at me and said "Sorry."

"What a clown I was. Not only not being of any use, I couldn't do anything. Like I'm just a dog waiting to lose."

"As I said, that's not the case."

"From here on, please call me doggy."

"....."

As I said.....

Stop trying to take your character in a weird direction.

"Well..... certainly, a lot's happened. But, even then, our objective was fulfilled — so we should be happy with what we got, in this case. You were able to settle it with just these injuries, too."

"But that person — she died."

".....Izumu-kun, huh. But that too — in the end, it couldn't be helped. In the first place, it was stranger for Izumu-kun to have lived this long..."

That being said.

There was still guilt.

No matter how much I glossed over it, it was the same.

Though it was the fox-masked man's intent to bring out Izumu-kun, the retired Izumu-kun, to the front of the stage — the one who made that happen was still me.

So Izumu-kun too...

It was like I killed him myself.

In Fukuoka, I told Izumu-kun something like 'You were thankfully able to lose safely', but at that time, Izumu-kun denied saying it wasn't a defeat. Then, now too, should I do as the fox-masked man and congratulate Niounomiya Izumu's defeat?

.....Deception.

What are you doing, getting swallowed in that idea?

There was no meaning.

None.

"How should I say this — it's lame." Said the desperately self-deprecating Moeta-kun. "This return trip is especially lame. Idiotic."

"Return trips are mostly like this."

"Maybe."

"More than that, Moeta-kun — now, how should I say it, not just about your part-time job. I will tell you just in case, but you shouldn't force yourself. Your arms are broken, so first focus on healing. In that period, I will pay for your living expenses. Of course, for the hospital bill too."

"I will gratefully let myself be spoiled by that, Ii-nii."

"I am," said Houko-chan. "Maybe for Moeta-kun, but I don't need to be hospitalized. Wounds of this degree will heal on their own if I lick them."

".....right."

If I responded with the normal retort of 'how are you going to lick your forehead', I felt that Houko-chan would say something weird again, so I just nodded.

"Well, anyhow, you two, good work. Thank you. You two may say stuff like that, but you really helped me out. Yes, to the point I feel bad for being the only one to have done nothing. Anyway, it's not something I can do anything about on my own. In a way, having Houko-chan and Moeta-kun there was more reassuring than having Aikawa-san."

"Aikawa-san... Jun-san, huh." Moeta-kun said to himself. "Ii-nii... I talked to her a little."

".....umm. What did you talk about?"

I was a bit interested in that. Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun, the Contractor and the Grim Reaper, what kind of conversation did they partake in?

"No matter what, you can't see through her. She seems frank, and probably is really frank, but it doesn't come through."

"It doesn't come through?"

"I'm sure it's simple — simple to the point we can't compare to her. Her way of thinking is too simple, so when people like us look at it, it's conversely complex."

".....well, I mainly agree with you on that."

"About her father too, a little." Said Moeta-kun. "I heard her talk about him a little."

"Father..."

The fox-masked man.

Saitou Takashi.

And also, Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya.

"A mixture of hate and love — I guess."

"....."

A mixture of hate and love.

The words seemed too simple.

Though I felt like they fit.

Moeta-kun continued.

"However, in regards to that — it's the same for me and Houko. No, in the end, this kind of feeling more or less exists between all parents and their children....."

"I wonder what Aikawa-san wanted to do." I said. "Meeting her father again, the father that should have died ten years ago, that she killed herself — just what did she want to do?"

She was always searching for him.

I think those were her true feelings.

I don't think she's someone who would lie about that.

However...

In reality, if she saw Saitou Takashi...

Whether or not she would be able to do that is dubious.

"In the first place, if you asked me whether a person that soft on her family would actually be able to kill her own father, I wouldn't be able to answer confidently. I can't affirm that I trust her unconditionally. Even that time ten years ago — she talked about it as if she hadn't acted directly."

"That person... is soft."

Houko-chan said.

"Too soft."

"....."

"At that time, when she protected Moeta-kun — she was soft enough to melt."

"Though it's thanks to that that I was saved. If I had hit the wall directly with that momentum, my spinal cord would have been done for."

"Right. If she hadn't done that, I think that the orange person wouldn't have been so overwhelming for Jun-san—"

"No, Houko-chan, that's wrong." I said. "You can say that because you didn't really see it with your own eyes. There was an absolute gap in power. It was all about power. The result was due to unquestioning brute force. Between Aikawa-san and Magokoro — there's an insurmountable wall. It wasn't a problem of mentality, it was more of a physical problem."

Though, I really couldn't believe it.

An absolute capable of denying the absolute.

An existence capable of denying existence.

Fear,

disgust,

and much more than that.

".....that orange person — she is Onii-chan's colleague that I occasionally hear about, right?"

"Yes..... that's her, but I don't really understand."

"Don't understand?"

"I don't understand."

I nodded.

"It's too... vague. While being the Omokage Magokoro that I know, she is also an Omokage Magokoro that I don't know at all."

"You parted a few years ago, didn't you?" Said Moeta-kun. "Ii-nii thought she died, but she lived on regardless — with a few years, people change. In my eyes, someone who never changes is nothing more than a fantasy."

"A fantasy huh — maybe that's true."

However.

Not that, more concretely.

.....

Migishita Rurero, Kino-san, and Tokinomiya Jikoku the Thought Manipulator, setting aside what they did to Magokoro — with the fox-masked man's '*rather the opposite*', for someone to do something to Magokoro in the beginning — if that's the case, I could make a guess.

ER3 System.

The ultimate research research laboratory facility.

MS-2.

And, the Orange Seed.

"Well, we will meet them again anyway. Ii-nii, you just have to clarify things at the time. It's pointless to think about it. Now, as Ii-nii says, let's rest. Ii-nii too, though you weren't injured, you must be really tired."

"Aah..... yeah."

I wonder, would we meet again?

The fox-masked man said so.

We will contact you from our side.

I—

Would I just wait in fear for that?

Like a fool, just waiting?

If I was going to just wait for good luck, I might as well be asleep — but, no matter what the Worst meant, it couldn't have been anything good.

The antidote.

In any case, at least we got that.

Now, what I should do.

The way I must choose.

The path I must choose.

".....Moeta-kun. Houko-chan."

"What is it? Ii-nii, being formal." Moeta-kun said. "That doesn't suit you."

"No... I was just thinking, thank you for this case."

"We already heard that earlier. But I don't remember having done enough to deserve being thanked twice."

"Yeah..... but, well, at the very least, we can now save Miiko-san..... so, you two, you should step back now, I think."

"....."

"....."

Moeta-kun and Houko-chan — they were silent.

After a while, Moeta-kun said "Certainly,".

"If Miiko-san is saved, meddling in Ii-nii's trouble any longer would be strange."

"Yes. This was originally a problem between me and mister fox— Miiko-san was just caught up in that, and you two were too, Moeta-kun and Houko-chan. Seeing Izumu-kun dying that way, seeing him being killed that way — I really don’t think that you have any need to go along me anymore."

"—I am..."

Houko-chan said.

"I am Onii-chan's slave."

"And before that, my friend."

I said.

"I can't endure seeing my friends getting hurt in front of me anymore. If this kind of thing keeps repeating, something will happen."

Rather, it might be easier.

Something happening for real.

If I went crazy, maybe it would be easier.

.....no, if I’m at the point where I'm considering that seriously, I might already be crazy.

Even then.

"However — Ii-nii, maybe we're already past the point where we can say things like that. This time Mii-nee was probably just caught up, but if you

consider that, don't you think they have no problem involving anyone from Ii-nii's surroundings?"

"Yes..... that's true."

No hesitation — rather than that, it might be that **either way is fine**. It's not worth enough to purposely avoid, to expressly not do. Either way is fine. While using Kino-san to put a disease in Miiko-san, they also gave away the antidote just as easily. Umm, how should I put it, that half heartedness — I can understand it.

He doesn't care.

He isn't interested.

It's the most... troubling.

I can't deal with it.

"Then, from their perspective, Houko-chan and I are **the same either way** too, right? Even if we choose to side with Ii-nii or not, it doesn't change the fact that we are around Ii-nii. If you say we are involved, then we have been from way back, ever since we met Ii-nii."

".....right."

That's karma.

That's destiny.

Before you realize it, you were already bound hand and foot and restricted by the string of destiny, and, without being able to move, you have no choice.

You can't choose and you can't decide.

"In the end, that's how it is."

"If every path is dangerous, then fighting the enemy fits our disposition more."

"As Moeta says," Houko-chan continues. "Arriving at this point, we can't retreat. Also, Onii-chan — even we have pride."

".....That's worthless, Houko-chan. Looking at how you were unable to stand a chance against Magokoro... that's just worthless. Pride? The pride of a *Killing Name* or whatever? Worthless. Didn't you run away precisely because of that kind of worthless thing, because you hated that fate?"

"I don't care about that. Losing is effectively worthless. The non-worthless problem is — I wasn't able to protect Onii-chan."

"....."

"I thought I said it many times. I thought I repeated it many, many, many times over. I just can't stand it — stand seeing Onii-chan getting hurt. I'm

being insolent, but not being able to endure seeing your friends getting hurt isn't something limited only to Onii-chan."

"Then, we're just going in circles."

I don't want Houko-chan and the rest to get hurt.

Houko-chan and the rest don't want me to get hurt.

Then, no matter how much time passes,

We can't go forward, can we?

Even though we can't go back at this point.

Even though there's no way we can go back.

"More than going around in circles, it's a vicious circle. More than playing tag, it's match pumping. Mii-nee too, when her consciousness returns, I don't know what she'll say. Mii-nee too, though she was involved, isn't it more like she stuck her head in it by protecting Ii-nii?"

"Yes....."

"Really, just what should we do?"

Moeta-kun said, as if it wasn't his business.

It seems he was really troubled.

"I'm in a bind."

"....."

"Well, setting me aside, Houko is Ii-nii's slave, so if you tell her not to get involved, I don't think she can go against it."

"....."

I looked at Houko-chan.

Houko-chan diverted her eyes.

.....Well, if only I could say it that easily, I wouldn't have hardships. And, it's not like I don't understand what Houko-chan and Moeta-kun are saying, either.

I really do get it.

"Also — I will just add, Ii-nii, about that problem, I have one more concern." Moeta-kun said. "No, that concern in itself is already too present, and I feel it's a little late to mention it — however, in the end, I couldn't see his appearance either, and though it's quite far from the fox-masked man or fate or things like that..."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Yamiguchi Nureginu." Moeta-kun wore a difficult expression. "**Why did he — not show his appearance before us?**"

"Why, you say....." I tilted my head. "Is that weird?"

If I remember correctly, according to Emoto-san, this time, the *Thirteen Stairs* present at the Sumiyuri Academy ruins were Emoto-san, Ichirizuka Konomi, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, Tokinomiya Jikoku, Migishita Rurero, Noise-kun, whom you shouldn't forget about, and Omokage Magokoro — and Yamiguchi Nureginu. However, this time, we didn't meet everyone. The *Space Creator* Ichirizuka Konomi, Tokinomiya Jikoku and, as Moeta-kun said, Yamiguchi Nureginu — we didn't meet them.

"Yes. Exactly. Of course, in this case *showing his appearance* is just a metaphor. Yamiguchi Nureginu, *Nureginu the Concealed*, doesn't show himself in front of anyone, as usual — however, I can't accept the fact that **he didn't have anything in store for us**."

".....I don't.... really get it. Wasn't it just by chance? It's not like Yamiguchi Nureginu was the only one we didn't meet—"

"In the case of Ichirizuka Konomi and Tokinomiya Jikoku, unlike Yamiguchi Nureginu, although those two didn't appear in front of us— even then, they had a reason for being here. Of course, for Ichirizuka Konomi, it was to split us up as the *Space Creator*. For Tokinomiya Jikoku... err, to restrain Omokage Magokoro."

"....."

Migishita Rurero, Kino Raichi, Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Once Kino-san's *poison* gets *infected*, there's no need to be anywhere near the target, but for technique users like Rurero-san or Tokinomiya Jikoku, being near the target must be more convenient — well, that's certainly correct.

Restraining Magokoro.

Rather, the opposite huh.

"But, Ii-nii — just Yamiguchi Nureginu, only Yamiguchi Nureginu, had no reason for being in that academy, did he? There shouldn't have been any need for him to be there."

"Is that really the case? If you're saying that, it's the same for the Miotsukushi Sisters. Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami. Because Izumu-kun came, these two ended up not having a role, but that's just a coincidence—"

"However, the fox-masked man already predicted that Izumu-kun would probably come — rather, is there any doubt that this is something he planned? No, there's no doubt — it's very likely that the fox-masked man inserted the Miotsukushi Sisters in the *Thirteen Stairs* as a means of provoking

Niounomiya Izumu. Then, it was inevitable for the Miotsukushi Sisters to be at that academy. Even if his goal wasn't fulfilled, the same went for the guide Noise and the essential healer Sonoki Emoto, if it's even the case for that emotionally unstable Doctor—"

Moeta-kun said.

"**Yamiguchi Nureginu's existence feels out of place.**"

"....."

"Since Ii-nii is unfamiliar with these kinds of things, it might not really strike home, but this kind of discomfort, if we don't quickly do something about it, the situation will evolve into something dire. Ii-nii has a habit of ignoring that kind of foreshadowing, but I don't. I am the sort of guy that cuts down the present foreshadowing."

No — a Grim Reaper.

—Moeta-kun summarized.

.....Yamiguchi Nureginu.

The assassin who won't ever appear in front of anyone.

Well, if he said it like that, it was certainly unnatural, I guess..... Since there's no way I could read the objective of the fox-masked man's actions, I expressly tried not to think about that kind of mystery — however, even if the principles of the fox-masked man's actions were unclear, that wasn't necessarily the case for his subordinates, the *Thirteen Stairs*, as well.

Yamiguchi Nureginu — Assassin.

"Ii-nii. Ii-nii — what do you think?"

"Umm..... I think that — that he probably wasn't here for me, but the focus of his selection may have been on Houko-chan and Moeta-kun." I said what I thought. "*Nureginu the Concealed* reason for being here was the same as the Miotsukushi Sisters role as a counterplan for Niounomiya Izumu — maybe being cautious of Houko-chan and Moeta-kun, who have the highest fighting ability around me, is the normal way of thinking for the fox-masked man."

Well, I didn't know, but Houko-chan and Moeta-kun had a serious connection with the *Killing Names*, so it may have been natural to think like that. Though it was a deduction without any ground, it was probably right. Since he used Miiko-san as a way to make me waver, anyone could have predicted that the other residents of the rundown apartment would meddle in.

Saying that much, I realized.

Right..... if that's the case.

"It's probably as Ii-nii says. Maybe this time, Yamiguchi Nureginu didn't have the chance to meet us, and there's no problem if we understand it like that. However—"

Right.

That being said, however—

"**It's not necessarily the case from here on**."

"....."

"Yamiguchi Nureginu — perhaps, since Niounomiya Izumu and the Miotsukushi Sisters are no longer here, he will come straight for us. Using a *Killing Name* to deal with a *Killing Name* is the natural way of thinking. No matter what Ii-nii thinks, to us it's the same thing."

"So it's already beyond the level of just **being involved** or **sticking your head in**?"

"Setting Mii-nee and the people around Ii-nii aside, judging from what I know, aren't Houko-chan and I being incorporated as pieces of the Story? Without concern for Ii-nii's will, nor for ours."

"Not choosing... and not deciding, huh?"

It is being chosen,

And it is being decided.

"I'm beaten."

"I am indeed beaten."

"I am beaten."

When our opinions all matched,

the train came.

It was the first train.

Looking at the platform, there weren't any passengers boarding.

Rather, it was an unmanned station, without any staff.

Good grief, I shrugged.

Anyway, let's rest.

My body, brain, and mind were at their limits.

A lot of things happened — too many things.

Izumu-kun's death.

Meeting Magokoro.

About Aikawa-san.

About the fox-masked man too — let's forget about that for now.

Forget.

And rest up.

Let's rest, shall we...
"—Eh."
I escaped the hospital,
returned to the apartment,
went to Sumiyuri Academy,
left Sumiyuri Academy,
arrived at the station,
and,
in all this time,
for the first time,
my mind faltered,
my mind loosened,
And in that moment.

My back was pushed.

"—Huh, what?"
My legs didn't work.
I couldn't put any strength in my legs.
My legs were not on the ground.
My body was floating.
The train,
the train, on the railway.
Running on the railway.
Was entering the station.
It was bad.
At this rate, the railway—
on the railway,
I would fall on the railway.
Fall.
But,
my legs not being able to step means,
in the air,
a change of direction midway,
I'm not a cat.
suddenly, even if,
you say this,

there's no way I can deal—
"Onii-chan!"
My arm was pulled.
It was Houko-chan.
Houko-chan, with the strength of her entire body, with all her strength,
she pulled me back on the platform.
Pulled me.
In the air,
I was already sticking out on the railway,
my body,
was returned.
It was returned, but,
even then,
the law of dynamics.
to pull me — Houko-chan's body,
Was small.
Too small.
Setting her arm strength aside,
She didn't have enough weight.
Not enough.
Even though my weight was about average.
So, even then, if she pulled me,
me, who was in the air,
with the support, point of lever and point of action—
this time Houko-chan was,
going forward.
Forward.
Where there is no footing,
on the railway.
The train.
The horn.
The sound of the brake.
Not in time.
Not in time.
Not in time.
Not in time.
".....HOUKO!"

And.
On my back,
on my back,
when I was falling on the platform on my back,
while I screamed,
what I saw,
with both arms broken,
Moeta-kun, with both arms sealed,
Ishinagi Moeta was,
wedging himself in front of Houko-chan.
Moeta-kun and Houko-chan crashed.
There, Houko-chan's momentum was killed,
and with the shock of the crash,
backwards.
Reflected.
To the platform.
She bounced back.
Overlapping with my body.
Thump.
The sound echoed on the wound of my chest.
The inside of my body oscillated.
And, suddenly.
Suddenly.
The momentum of Houko-chan, who had bounced back;
Moeta-kun received the same amount of power,
Moeta-kun, who was already on the border of the platform,
like that,
on the line,
fell.
Fell.
He couldn't use his arms.
He couldn't climb back.
Falling on his back.
He couldn't move.
"Mm."
Moeta-kun was making a troubled face.
A mysterious face.

Then,
looking at me and Houko-chan, who stood up,
looking,
looking,
"Aah."
Then,
he showed a satisfied expression.
And,
smiling,
with his best smile,
as if fulfilled, he smiled broadly.
Houko.
You can't go against what Ii-nii tells you.
Ii-nii.
I'm entrusting Houko to you.

"Goodbye."

The worst party that was held in September.
Achieved the primary goal.
The antidote.
Miiko-san will be saved with this.
But we were not unhurt.
The damage was enormous.
One injured.
Yamiguchi Houko.
One missing.
Aikawa Jun.
Two casualties.
Niounomiya Izumu.
Ishinagi Moeta.

ACT 11 - RESTING PERIOD

YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU
ASSASSIN

0

What hurts hurts.
What hurts hurts.

1

I didn't really understand why, but she had a dark expression.

"I don't really understand why, but you have a dark expression."

I tried saying it.

It became an even darker expression.

It was amusing, I thought.

I didn't really understand why, but I thought it was amusing.

Hearing about the situation, it seemed that tomorrow, an experiment summing everything up until now would be held. I thought, hasn't this already happened a few times? However, tomorrow's experiment would be on a whole different scale than the previous ones.

It seemed she was reluctant.

"If you don't like it, just say so."

I tried demanding something from another person that I myself couldn't do.

She said she didn't like it.

I paradoxically thought it was amusing.

In reality, it wasn't really interesting at all.

Rather, you could say it was unpleasant.

But I thought it was amusing.

"If I refused the experiment, I wouldn't have any reason to be here. That means I would get disposed of. I don't have a choice in the first place," I was told in a dark tone. It was a depressing story to hear. Even though she was normally bright, only when treated as experiment or research fodder, she

became low spirited — as if her battery ran out. From my perspective, that gap was mysterious and unnatural, so I found it amusing.

I liked it.

But that time, she was awfully depressed.

It looked serious, I thought.

"Then,"

I said.

"Let's flee together."

I said lightly.

I meant to cheer her up.

I was just encouraging her.

I knew we couldn't escape.

At that time, I knew it well.

I,

already,

at that time, had destroyed Kunagisa Tomo.

I had killed Kunagisa Tomo.

I knew,

knew that I couldn't do anything.

That I couldn't even run away.

No matter where I ran, it was the same.

I knew that, in the end, it was the same place.

That's why I was able to say it.

"Let's escape together, holding our hands, until the end of the world."

Hearing that,

I didn't really understand why, but she had a happy expression.

Therefore,

therefore I,

in the end, until the end,

I couldn't even apologize to her —

".....Good morning."

Since then, one week had passed.

Eighth of October, Saturday.

That day, when I woke up in the hospital I was readmitted to, Miiko-san sat next to me.

Asano Miiko.
Blue hospital gown, sitting on a pipe chair.
She was probably worn out.
But her posture was straight.
A reliable aura.
Her tough expression — it was just as usual.
"....."
"What is it?"
"Miiko-san....."
"Um?"
"Miiko-san, kiss—"
".....Smile."
A chop to the throat.
I received serious damage to my respiratory system.
"Miiko-san..... Attacks to my throat affect my life..... the sight of me coughing because of breathing difficulties is so pitiful....."
"Sexual harassment is forbidden."
"Yes....."
So strict.
I can't believe this was the attitude she showed to the person who saved her life.....
".....You seem to be fine. That's the most important part."
"Yes."
Miiko-san nodded.
"Well, my consciousness came back a while ago, but I was only able to move again today."
".....Is that so."
Even though Rabumi-san didn't say anything.
So she hid it.
Well, it must have just been that visitors weren't allowed.
"And Suzunashi-san? Where is she?"
"Sleeping."
"Sleeping?"
"On the bed of my hospital room."
"On the bed of Miiko-san's hospital room."
"She's a real nuisance."
"....."

What a terrible thing to say.

Even though Suzunashi-san must have been awake day and night until Miiko-san regained her consciousness.....

"With her big body."

"Yeah...."

"Why is she so tall for just being Suzunashi?"

"Yeah....."

She said some absurd things.

She was strangely selfish in regards to Suzunashi-san.

Well, concerning these two... No need to say anything pointless.

These two understood each other really well.

Miiko-san didn't thank Suzunashi-san,

and Suzunashi-san didn't request any thanks.

For those two,

that kind of thing was exceedingly normal.

When she woke up,

it was normal for her to be there.

Just like what Miiko-san was doing for me now.

Mmm.

I was a bit jealous.

".....Then, are you to be discharged?"

"Nnya. My body is still really stiff. I think I can barely walk." Miiko-san said, unconcerned. "I guess I'll stay the whole month in the hospital."

"Is that so....."

"My body is faltering."

"Right."

"Even though I was trained."

"Right."

"A shame."

"Right."

It was a weird conversation.

Rather, too ordinary.

That's right.....

This kind of calm conversation, it'd been a while.

Miiko-san's pleasant distance.

It felt so nice that it was strange.

Even though this kind of comfort...

There was no way it could be forgiven.

A discomfort.

".....Miiko-san, how much do you know?"

"Umm?"

"When you woke up this time."

"Ummm." Miiko-san tilted her head. "Currently, not much. Or rather, nothing at all. Since I didn't receive an explanation from anyone, I don't really know."

"Is that so."

"But I know that Moe died."

".....Is that so."

"A shame."

"....."

"A shame."

The second one after Hime, huh.

Miiko-san said with an inexpressive face.

"So..... what happened to Hou?"

"Ah, err... likewise, she's hospitalized here."

"Um? Really? I didn't hear about that..... Inoji, that's—"

"No, her wounds are not that serious, not something that might affect her life. There was a big wound on her forehead, but she can hide it with her hair. She's young so it will immediately become unnoticeable. Just— umm."

"That's vague. Is it hard to say?"

"Yes..... somewhat."

"Is it better not to ask?"

".....I will omit the details. I still haven't digested it myself. But it's not about me, it's about Houko-chan and Moeta-kun — so Miiko-san, listen carefully."

"Yes."

"Houko-chan — you see. Seeing Moeta-kun die in front of her, it was a huge shock, and her mind — it’s suffering from heavy damage."

"I heard he was run over by a train." Miiko-san nodded. "After something like that, she can't possibly not change."

"Before her eyes too — no matter how strong she looks, she's still a thirteen year old girl."

".....Yes. Well, that's right. So?"

"For the last week, she's been frantic." I said. "She's been fed tranquilizers and is bound to the bed in her room. She hit the walls, broke a window and even tried to jump out from there — it seems she has an excessive tendency towards self-mutilation."

"....."

As expected, Miiko-san was silent. Maybe she couldn't imagine Houko-chan being like that. Since she was normally such a strong child, even I couldn't.

To be honest, I hadn't yet seen that Houko-chan either. I hadn't seen her with my own eyes. This was all from Rabumi-san's reports. That's why I still wasn't fully convinced — however, her visits were even more restricted than Miiko-san's, despite having been here for a whole week, I still could not pay her a visit. She was in a situation where nobody but doctors and nurses could see her apparently.

Since even that frivolous Rabumi-san spoke with a serious face, no matter how unconvinced I was, it was probably the truth.

I guess... it was no wonder.

I mean.

From Houko-chan's perspective,

it was like she killed Moeta-kun herself.

The one who pushed Moeta-kun onto the railway,

was without a doubt,

Houko-chan herself.

Sibling.

Even though they were... siblings.

Even though they were the only two siblings for them.

".....Heavy."

Eventually Miiko-san said while sighing.

"Hou and Moe, and even you — despite being kids, you carry such heavy things with you."

"Even you Miiko-san, you're not so old that you can treat us like kids, right?"

"Yes." She nodded. "But, for a thirteen year old girl, a relative's death, a relative's corpse, a relative's life — it's unbelievably heavy."

"My little sister too — she died when I was a kid."

"I see."

"Well, I guess it's heavy. Though people's deaths are unavoidable, they're too heavy for one person to bear. When a human dies, really — you can't do anything about it."

Really... you can't do anything.

You are too powerless.

.....No, can you really not do anything?

Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

Despite having died, they were alive.

And Kajou Akira was living inside Saitou Takashi.

Niounomiya Izumu died once, then once more.

And, Omokage Magokoro.

".....So Hou will be hospitalized for a while too."

"Yes, surely."

"And you?"

"My wound, well, it wasn't anything big, so I'll be fine. To the point that being hospitalized for one week is already too long. I think I'll be discharged at the beginning of next week."

"Hmm."

"Please don't doubt me, it's the truth. Just—" I instinctively looked down. "I don't really know what to do, either."

"....."

"Honestly I thought that would be the end."

Miiko-san didn't know anything.

About the fox-masked man or about the *Thirteen Stairs*.

About destiny or about the world or about the Story.

She didn't ask and I didn't say anything.

But,

she must have noticed a little by now.

That something was currently happening around me.

Hime-chan dying

and Moeta-kun dying,

they were not unrelated.

I guess she noticed.

Her instincts were as sharp as a Japanese blade.

"I don't know... I don't know what I should do, I don't know what the **other side** will do or what they want to do. It's as vague as making an enemy out of a mirage."

"Isn't vagueness your speciality?"

"I'm not good with this kind of vagueness. The vagueness I'm good at is *stagnant* — the one in this situation is more *unclear*."

Withholding the answer,

or not having an answer,

that distinction.

"Unclear, huh."

"Unidentified and ambiguous — the only thing I know is that **the other side doesn't intend to settle things in a clear way—**"

Then, what should I do?

The end of the world and the end of the Story too — if he didn't wish for an end like that, then for the fox-masked man,

for Saitou Takashi, what was the end?

Not something that concrete...

Something more abstract?

Just what...

What was he wishing for?

"Well — you're in a complicated situation."

"Yes."

"Well — I will choose to stay ignorant for now. Anyhow, at this rate, I couldn't do anything this month. Don't worry, I won't bother you anymore."

"....."

"I don't intend to drag you down any further."

"Miiko-san, that's—"

"It's fine. At that time, I shouldn't have protected you from that guy. I am, in the end, overprotective. To the point where I don't know my place."

".....Please don't say that Moeta-kun died because of that."

With just Houko-chan, it was more than enough.

More than enough.

"I won't say something like that."

Miiko-san shook her head.

"I won't say it. Even if my mouth is torn open."

"I'm relieved."

"But if by me being hurt Moe, Hou or you end up being unnecessarily hurt too, then it's better to not get hurt."

"....."

"Sorry for talking like I knew everything back then, Inoji." Said Miiko-san. "I don't think I'm in the wrong, but your stance isn't wrong either. It's correct."

"Correct..."

"No matter for whose sake they are, your wounds are yours. They're not something that anyone can shoulder in your place. I, as well as Hou, didn't understand that.

Get hurt all you want.

"I will endure that. If it hurts too much, I will suck it up."

I thought... I should no longer get hurt.

That if someone was to grieve, I shouldn't get hurt.

But, it's no good like that.

In the end, it's no good like that.

It's no good **with just that**.

Getting hurt.

Getting hurt getting hurt getting hurt.

There are things you don't understand without that.

Though you can't endure looking at others' wounds.

Though you can't endure others getting hurt.

Even then.

Without averting your eyes, without closing your eyes.

Without ever closing your eyes.

Not even blinking for an instant.

Properly looking,

properly witnessing.

You have to endure.

That's...

The difference between kindness and sweetness.

Right.

Don't be so spoiled.

Your wounds,

and others' wounds,

don't fear them.

Wounding each other.

Licking each others' wounds.

"I will grow up."

I muttered.

"No matter what anyone else thinks — I will grow up."

"....."

"I will change. It may be too late, it may be too complacent, but I will change. With my battle against you, I will grow up and change, Saitou Takashi."

Even if you said I was your enemy.

Now, you were no longer my enemy.

Now, I wouldn't say any spoiled things anymore.

To anyone.

I wouldn't be spoiled.

"I see."

Miiko-san stood up from the pipe chair.

Her legs seemed a bit wobbly.

She really wasn't in good shape.

"I don't really get it — but, well, it's fine. You're not as depressed as I thought so, I'm relieved."

"Depressed.....?"

"When Hime died, weren't you a mess?" Miiko-san said. "I thought I would console you again if you were depressed about Moe. But I didn't have to."

"Console, is it?"

"Yes."

"That.... I'm still fine."

"I see."

"It can't be helped that Houko-chan gets depressed — rather, it's natural for her to be. But, though I don't really understand it myself, it's like, in this case — I feel like it's wrong for me to grieve Moeta-kun's death."

"Umm?"

"Because Moeta-kun, in the end, he was smiling."

"In our apartment, he was one of the rare few, or rather, the only one who smiled."

Always... alone.

As if shouldering everyone else.

He was silently smiling.

"Yes. He was until the end. Also, he seemed very satisfied."

The meaning behind that smile — was understood in two completely opposite ways between Houko-chan and Moeta-kun.

However, that being said, Moeta-kun,

until the very end, like Houko-chan,

I think he was protecting the person he loved.

That's why he was satisfied.

He was filled to the brim.

"Although, I guess it's natural for Houko-chan, who was left behind. No matter what Moeta-kun thought, she can't think the same."

"I guess. If you understand that —" Miiko-san said. "Is it fine to entrust Hou to you? Honestly, at this point, it feels like I can't handle it. That kind of heavy pain... I really can't imagine it."

"Yes."

"That's why I won't stick my nose in anymore, but if you have something you want me to do, I'm always ready."

"I will take you up on that."

"When everything is over, treat me to some sake."

"Yes. At that time, let's talk about the past."

Miiko-san smiled bitterly,

and left the hospital room.

.....

I collapsed my raised upper body.

I tried being in a daze.

Thinking.

Not thinking.

Sighing.

".....Tch."

We really forced ourselves.

Miiko-san and I.

Like everyday life — but unlike everyday life.

It wouldn't go on as it always had.

Miiko-san, Houko-chan and I were all close to dying.

And Moeta-kun died.

Wounds.

The pain of wounds, huh?

Painful.

Frustrating.

But, I could endure it.

I would endure it.

"I will grow up....."

For Hime-chan's sake.

For Moeta-kun's sake.

For Izumu-kun's sake.

And most importantly, for my sake.

"Right..... if I don't know what the opponent will do, I need to set something up from my side."

Since that one week.

Some wounds have healed.

Some wounds haven't healed.

The majority are wounds that can never be healed.

Then,

no more.

I will stop waiting.

I resolved myself. Right — I can't sit around waiting, biting my fingers.

I can't wait for the other side's contact.

Changing sides.

"Yes — then, I guess..... It might be a bit of a cheap development, but I guess I should ask that pleasant and wonderful dear friend to appear once—"

2

No matter what happens, time always passes.
The time won't go back or stop.
Advancing.
Even if it can be accelerated.
It will simply advance forward.
Just like that.
No matter how extraordinary the situation, everyday life won't disappear.
So that there is always a way to go back.
Everyday life won't disappear.
The next day.
"Gyahoooi! Runrurun!"
Rabumi-san was in high spirits, as always.
.....
Err.....
How should I say it, when I was feeling down like that, having someone nearby who didn't give me time to feel down made me feel even worse.....
"It's breakfast! Eat!"
".....Thanks for the meal."
Well..... It was as Rabumi-san said before. When I thought that it was all for the sake of cheering up a patient like me, it didn't make me feel too bad.
Rice porridge.
Miso soup.
Konjac salad.
Jelly.
"Is it good? I made it myself."
"Don't lie."
It was hospital food no matter how you looked at it.
Surprisingly, Rabumi-san even tried that petty trick of putting bandages around her fingertips to imitate old manga.
Her tricks were pointlessly skillful.....

"Though, since it's my first time, I'm not that confident. Ah, but, though it looks like that, the taste isn't terrible."

"....."

I was impressed by her will to keep going with her bizarre jokes until the end.

I wanted to learn a thing or two from her.

"By the way I~i~."

"What is it?"

"Maid love!"

"What?"

"Won't your maid come today?"

"No. She just came yesterday."

"Keh. Boring."

She just blurted out her real true feelings!

And I didn't get it.

"If your maid doesn't come, I'll just feel depressed being here, so I'll go back."

"How cruel....."

"Idiot! Idiot!"

"Are you a kid?"

Rabumi-san tidied the utensils up.

She was proficient at this kind of thing.

Then, as she was leaving.

"Right, right. You can meet Houko-chan."

She said.

"Eh?"

Naturally, I was surprised.

Rabumi-san grinned.

"The visit interdiction is removed."

"Heeh..... I thought it would last longer."

"It's a removal only for I~i~."

"What?"

"Frankly, unofficial."

"....."

"Houko-chan's state became relatively better, so they toned down the monitoring. Now's your chance. Today, from 10 to 13 o'clock, it looks like there'll be a gap, so aim for that. I'll unlock the door for you."

"I'm thankful for your consideration..... But, Rabumi-san, is that okay?"

"Of course not."

"Yeah..."

"I don't know anything."

Do as you wish, said Rabumi-san.

"But... err, um....."

"What? Weren't you the one worried about Houko-chan the entire week? You pervert lolicon bastard."

".....But if someone like me, who isn't even a specialist, comes in and acts half-assedly, umm — wouldn't that be bad for Houko-chan, just as she's about to recover?"

"She isn't recovering."

Rabumi-san's shoulders drooped.

It didn't suit her.

In the first place, said Rabumi-san.

"I wonder if you can even call that a recovery."

".....?"

"Yahn! Don't mwake me talk too much! Rabumi-sama is a cool, nihilistic, drastic and stoic nurse!"

"First time I heard such a grandiose announcement."

Rather, that's already on the level of a scam.

Also, she probably mistook 'drastic' for dry or something like that.

"Bye! If you get caught, don't give my name!"

And Rabumi-san left.

That nurse was like a storm.

And,

time passed. It was nine and a half.

It was a bit early, but I left my hospital room.

I already looked up the position of Houko-chan's room, so I knew where it was. I also remembered the way there perfectly. But, since I didn't know how the situation would turn out, I couldn't decide if I should act with some leeway.

It felt a bit annoying to move according to Rabumi-san's plan, but since I would be discharged the next day, I was in a state where I had some boredom to spare. Setting aside whether seeing Houko-chan was a good idea or not, if

I had the chance, I should at least check up on her. For me, even stealthily peeking at the hospital room was fine.

"....."

Yesterday, since then.

I called Kouta-san.

Since using cellphones inside the hospital was prohibited, I naturally called from the zone set up for that.

The great thief, Ishimaru Kouta.

When I told her that Aikawa-san went missing once again, though she didn't make a racket, her mood worsened quite a bit. She kept repeating “it's not consummate, it's not consummate” many times. Imagining her struggle finding Aikawa-san, I could understand.

"It cannot be helped."

Kouta-san said.

"I guess I will start the search back up from square one."

".....Thank you for your hard work."

"This time it looks like I can reduce the area quite a lot, so I should try to comprehend the circumstances more and search for the cause. .....So? It's not like you called me just to report that to me, did you? Dear friend."

"Yes, there is one more thing I want to ask of you, Kouta-san."

".....Well, I will at least listen."

"Alongside searching Aikawa-san, there's one more person I want you to find."

"Yes, I see. Searching for a person. What's the name?"

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

".....The Zerozaki clan... is it?"

Kouta-san lowered her voice.

"Ummm, you see—"

"Please hold on, dear friend. Let's meet in person before you tell me the details. You are currently hospitalized, but when will you be discharged?"

"On Monday."

"Then, could you come meet me directly then? I will wait in a hotel in Kyoto on Monday, so let's meet there. I will call you on that day for the details."

—According to that.

I would tell her the details tomorrow.

I thought while walking down the hallway.

Zerozaki... Hitoshiki.

Demonic killer.

Living, huh?

Izumu-kun's will..... or something like that. I still hadn't decided how much I could trust it.

But, well, certainly.

Thinking about it, the information that Zerozaki died came from Rizumu-chan. Niounomiya Rizumu the *Carnival*'s investigation result — the report of Rizumu as a *great detective*, as requested by the fox-masked man, could not be wrong, but...

There was just one exception.

Just one exception.

Rizumu-chan's investigation was, first of all, for her *brother*'s sake. The result of the investigation must not result in any harm to Izumu-kun.

Two personalities in one body.

Rizumu-chan was just an alternative.

If Izumu-kun, if Niounomiya Izumu-kun was **trying to hide Zerozaki Hitoshiki's existence from the fox-masked man**, then there was no doubt that the result of Rizumu's investigation was *wrong*.

"Mmm..... But."

In the first place, Izumu-kun was the one to inform the fox-masked man about Zerozaki's existence.

So that's pretty unnatural..... ah, no.

No, at that point, the fox-masked man didn't consider Zerozaki as an enemy. Maybe Izumu-kun simply talked about Zerozaki as small talk — that's possible.

Then..... what does it mean? **Izumu-kun didn't want Zerozaki to become the fox-masked man's enemy** — is that what it is?

Izumu-kun spoke like he knew Zerozaki last month and the month before that. If Izumu-kun didn't just know Zerozaki Hitoshiki, but if he had a deeper connection, it would make sense.

Not just knowing about him.

If he knew him personally.

Well, I can't think that Izumu-kun and Zerozaki were friends, but even then — maybe, perhaps,

Izumu-kun may have covered for Zerozaki.

Covered from the hands of the fox-masked man.

Then, it was possible that following me and appearing at Sumiyuri Academy was due to guilt for me, who became Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative, who became the fox-masked man's *enemy* in his stead.

It could be explained.

Then, maybe he was alive.

Maybe Aikawa Jun didn't kill Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

.....I didn't know.

There wasn't enough information.

And the little information there was was entangled.

Niounomiya Rizumu saying that Zerozaki Hitoshiki died.

Niounomiya Izumu saying that Zerozaki Hitoshiki survived.

I really... didn't know.

If I remember correctly, when Izumu-kun was about to go fight Aikawa-san, I said something like "you shouldn't go, the one who killed Zerozaki Hitoshiki was probably Aikawa Jun, Aikawa-san doesn't have any mercy against **people like you**" — I wonder how Izumu-kun felt upon hearing those lines.

Just imagining it... was depressing.

Thinking about it now, I said too much.

Well anyway.

Concerning this case, there was nothing I could do. Since a *Killing Name* was involved, or rather, since the person in question was a *Killing Name*, even if I were to rely on Kunagisa, it would be hard.

Therefore, Kouta-san.

My conclusion was to rely on the unmatched Great Thief, Ishimaru Kouta.

I had to search like this first.

That being said, it was more like insurance. Whether Zerozaki was alive or not, it didn't matter at this point. Even if the fox-masked man learned that Zerozaki was alive now, he probably wouldn't try to do anything. He wouldn't designate Zerozaki as an enemy in my place. He'd be a reserve enemy at most.

Therefore, insurance.

More importantly, another approach was necessary.

This one would come after I was discharged.

After meeting Kouta-san, I would advance this plan.

Oops.....

Before that, I needed to contact Kunagisa.....

Now that it came down to it, I couldn't afford to not borrow Kunagisa's power, the Kunagisa Syndicate's power. That being said,

all of that was for after I'd be discharged.

Now, for now, Houko-chan—

".....Mmm?"

And.

At that instant.

A public phone set up in the phoning space further down the hallway rang.

A public phone rang.

".....?"

Errrr, can you even call a public phone.....? No, since they are technically phones, they must have a number, I guess.....? If there was a line going from here, then it's normal to think that it could come from the other side too. However, anyhow, it was the first time I'd encountered a situation like this, so I hesitated for an instant.

In my hesitation, I decided to enter that space. Since it was early in the morning, there was no one there. There was just a very immaculate sofa, a table, and a beautifully clean ashtray.

The phone didn't stop ringing.

Persistently, the bell continued to ring.

"....."

Impossible, I thought.

I thought, but how should I say it.

The timing.

This timing...

This encounter.

The Story.

I took the receiver.

"I won't answer any questions, I will talk one-sidedly. If you say even a single word, I will hang up on the spot."

It was modulated — an artificial voice.

"My name is Yamiguchi Nureginu."

"Eighth step of the *Thirteen Stairs* — Yamiguchi Nureginu."

".....!"

Unconsciously, my voice was about to leak, so I flusteredly covered my mouth. It's not like I took what the other person said seriously, but I shouldn't make a racket in a hospital.

I looked around me.

"You don't need to be wary, I'm not within the hospital. I don't intend to deal any harm to you."

"....."

"By the way, except for my master, you are the first to hear my voice."

Yamiguchi... Nureginu.

Nureginu-san said.

"Congratulations."

"....."

To those words, I was about to unconsciously respond 'thank you very much', but I somehow held on.

"Originally, I wouldn't make any direct contact with someone like you, but — I felt that I owed you an explanation, therefore I called you. It seemed that you couldn't use your cellphone in the hospital, so excuse me for going about it this way."

He had a very polite manner of speech.

That was also the case for Houko-chan. Was the *Yamiguchi* house strict about manners?

However.

However, even then.

No matter how polite he may have been.

"I was the one to push your back the other day."

It didn't change the fact that he was an assassin.

Yamiguchi Nureginu.

Nureginu the Concealed.

"....."

"The result was slightly different from what I had imagined, but since my objective was achieved, I will call it a success."

Objective.....?

Even if the result was different, the objective was completed, then — the objective **wasn't me**?

"My objective was Yamiguchi Houko."

Nureginu-san said.

"She was a disgrace to our house."

"....."

"It was fine when she was being quiet, but — it's different if she tries to use her *power*. Completely different. Hey, *Ii-chan*-san. Yamiguchi Houko's master."

Thoroughly... polite.

Polite to the end.

But I could only hear it as irony.

Hypocritical courtesy.

"It was obvious that if I threw you off, Houko would protect you. I could see that even with my eyes closed. More than pushing Houko herself — it was an even more certain method than that. Though, I didn't think that that filthy Grim Reaper would protect Houko—"

That's the result.

And the objective—

"But, seeing her brother die in front of her, no — killing him herself would rend her beyond recovery. At the very least, it would make her unable to exert her *power* ever again. Every time she would try, the image of her brother's death would come to her mind. Therefore, my objective was completed."

Certainly—

For Houko-chan, Moeta-kun's death was a much more painful experience than just being attacked herself.

I see.....

Then, the *concern* Moeta-kun was talking about just before that was a bullseye..... Yamiguchi Nureginu was in the *Thirteen Stairs* with Houko-chan and Moeta-kun as a target.

But..... However.

That being said, then.

What meaning does this call have?

"Young Nonsense User, have you understood that, for us, for existences like us, someone like you is an extreme bother?"

"....."

I mean.

He told me not to talk, yet still asks questions.

I was about to answer out of reflex.

"*A connection* is what mister fox would say, but, well, to be completely transparent, I don't think there are any grudges left between us." Nureginu-san said. "That time, I may have pushed your back, which led to Ishinagi Moeta dying and Yamiguchi Houko falling beyond recovery, but I want you to understand that this was my job. **I don't want to be resented by you**."

"....."

"Therefore, while I understand it is rude, the situation led me to this call."

Obviously — Nureginu-san continued.

"I don't expect that you will immediately be able to accept what I say. Even if assassinating Houko was a mission from my master, I fully understand that it doesn't mean anything to you."

Master.....

From that way of speaking then...

Is Nureginu's master not the fox-masked man?

To push that deduction out of the way, Nureginu-san,

"I am leaving the *Thirteen Stairs*."

Said that line.

“Since I *stopped* the Grim Reaper and Houko, there's no more meaning in me remaining in that organization."

"....."

"That was my original contract with mister fox — if Houko or the Grim Reaper were to move, then I would stop them."

Stop.

That was... assassination?

At that point, I felt like I really understood the reason why Izumu-kun hated the *Yamiguchi*, the reason why Houko-chan loathed her house.

I see...

"Until now, I have assassinated a fortune teller on a strange island and handled various small jobs without saying anything, but now that my objective is complete, although I admittedly still have some personal interest, I've judged that staying near that person is too dangerous."

.....So the one who killed Maki-san too... was this person.

But, it was mysterious.

Even hearing that, nothing special happened.

Even after including Moeta-kun and Houko-chan.

No anger... came forth.

Against this person.

Aah — I thought.

This person was a tool.

He was an assassin functioning entirely as a device.

Like a knife or a gun.

There was no will there.

In that sense, the fox-masked man killed Maki-san, and the one who put Houko-chan and Moeta-kun through all that was this person's master.

Master.....

So the fox-masked man borrowed Nureginu-san from his master.....

I wonder what kind of person they are.

Since he called Houko-chan a *disgrace*, should I assume that they have some connection with the *Yamiguchi* house? No, contracts within the family should be forbidden..... Then, maybe her being *a disgrace* was just Nureginu-san's impression.

The master had his own objective...

Houko-chan.

"Aah — please stop thinking about my master, *Ii-chan*-san. Do not worry, they do not have any connection to you. Well, though they have a small connection with Houko."

"....."

"Please don't resent me."

Nureginu-san repeated.

Persistently.

"Please don't resent me. No matter what happens, please don't resent me. I'm already leaving *Thirteen Stairs* and cutting all ties with you. I swear before the gods of Heaven and Earth, I won't lay a hand on you anymore. No matter what kind of orders mister fox gives, I will not obey them. Therefore, Nonsense User-san, please refrain from using your nonsense on me. Please... don't resent me."

When killing someone with a firearm, the firearm is to blame.

A knife hurting someone is the knife's responsibility.

I think Izumu-kun said that.

Then, you don't need to worry.

You yourself should not worry, Yamiguchi Nureginu.

I will definitely not resent you.

I will not resent you.

"I don't want another coming of Niounomiya Izumu. I must continue to serve my master from now on. I can't trip because of one disgrace and one filthy Grim Reaper." Nureginu-san still continued. "That's why I will give you some information."

"……?"

Information?

"Just me leaving the *Thirteen Stairs* would probably not be enough to satisfy you, as it's just convenient for me so, well — you could call this whistleblowing."

Whistle… blowing.

…….something that Neo-san would be good at.

Betraying.

Really — they didn't choose their means of achieving their goals.

The *Yamiguchi*.

I had no anger, and I had no hatred, but…….

I guess I was a bit irritated.

It became… weighty.

Without any care for me, Nureginu-san said.

"The Miotsukushi Sisters — they are aiming for you."

"……?"

The Miotsukushi Sisters?

Miotsukushi Misora… Miotsukushi Takami?

The two in that buddhist attire?

"It seems that those two think that they embarrassed themselves in front of mister fox. Though it was Niounomiya Izumu's doing, since that Niounomiya Izumu is now dead, their anger turned on you."

"……"

Hey hey……

Don't make me an outlet for your emotions.

That's crazy talk.

"Therefore, those two distanced themselves from mister fox's directions and are now moving alone. Mister fox tried to stop them, but it was probably useless. They will surely appear before you in due time."

Nureginu-san made a slightly weird breathing sound.

Maybe… maybe he was laughing.

"Those two have a lot of pride — their pride is the only thing they have a full person's worth of each. They probably can't face mister fox now. Also, it

looks like Konomi the *Space Creator* teased them a bit. A woman's jealousy is really scary."

"....."

"No, what's scary are women themselves maybe?"

Anyway, Nureginu-san said.

"You should be careful. Although they are from a branch family, professional killers are still professional killers — though the Miotsukushi Sisters are young, the only reason they couldn't do much to you the other day was because of Niounomiya Izumu, be careful not to forget that. On the topic of how you will deal with professional killers now that you don't have Houko or the Grim Reaper — though I am somewhat interested, well, not getting too invested would be in my best interest, in my master's best interest."

Hmmm.....

The Miotsukushi Sisters, huh..... If those two really did begin to move independently from the fox-masked man, it was certainly a pain. Even though, while they were acting under mister fox, their actions were unpredictable and ambiguous, they were still restrained in a way, and they could still be dealt with.

When a professional killer acts like one, it's always a pain.

I was no longer playing in my field.

It was the opponent's ring.

That day, at that station, like what Nureginu did to me, to Houko-chan and to Moeta-kun — if they came after me with such **a duty**, they were still pros.

There was no way I could deal with them.

It was bad.....

"....."

Rather, fox-masked man.

Please manage your subordinates properly.

Including Nureginu.

Despite having charisma, you really aren't popular.....

"In truth, I wanted to tell you a lot more. Like the current location of the fox-masked man or the state of the Orange Seed and Aikawa Jun. But if I tell you that information, I would end up being resented by the *Thirteen Stairs* instead. I do not want that. I will not take a stance."

A stance.

Balance.

Equilibrium huh.

"Well, if I have anything else left to say... let me see. Yes, apart from the Orange Seed, among the *Thirteen Stairs*, you should be wary of Ichirizuka Konomi and Migishita Rurero. Since they are women. They are strongly attracted to mister fox."

"....."

"And if you want to collapse the *Thirteen Stairs*, Utage Kudan or Emoto Sonoki would be a good start. Despite being Kudan (TL : the name means ninth step), the fourth step Utage Kudan has already been dismissed a few times by mister fox. It seems she is someone with no loyalty. As for Emoto Sonoki — well, since you already met her, I don't need to say anything more."

Nureginu-san stopped his words there. Maybe he was waiting for my reaction. Though I can't imagine how he would check the reaction of someone who can't speak.

"It was a long call, then, I will excuse myself now. Dear young Nonsense User-san. I absolutely don't care who will win between you and mister fox, but I will wish you good luck."

"**For you...**"

I...

I said.

"**What is the world's end, Yamiguchi Nureginu-san?**"

"....."

I thought there would be no answer.

Following his first affirmation, he would just hang up the phone.

I thought that.

But, after some silence,

Nureginu-san answered.

"**My master's death**."

And with that,

the call ended.

The line was cut.

Only a robotic noise was left.

I returned the receiver.

There was still nobody in the phone space.

I looked at the clock.

It was ten.

I needed to go.

I needed to go to Houko-chan's hospital room.

I didn't have time.

The world's end.

Kino-san wasn't interested.

Emoto-san wished for it.

And for Nureginu-san, it was one human's end.

.....That reminded me, in the end, I couldn't hear Noise-kun's opinion. That being said, the answer of someone without a name like him, it was like I'd already heard it.

I feel like dying — that was it.

Well, setting that aside.

With that, both Noise-kun and Nureginu-san have retired from *Thirteen Stairs*. Disregarding the first step Kajou Akira, the current number of subordinates under mister fox was ten.

Ten people, huh?

.....

It didn't really feel like it reduced.

No matter how, thirteen people was too many.

Make it like the Four Heavenly Kings.

Since he wasn't popular.

"......"

While I was thinking,

I arrived at the hospital room.

The door of the room Houko-chan was hospitalized in was unlocked by Rabumi-san, so I only needed to pull it sideways.

And,

Houko-chan was,

On the bed.

".....Houko-chan."

In a patient gown, with bandages around her forehead.

Houko-chan, whose upper body was raised,

had awfully empty eyes.

Her body was trembling.

Grasping tightly onto the sheets .

.....I understood what Rabumi-san had said.

Could you really say she had recovered when she was like that?

If it was like this, she might have been better off when she was struggling desperately.

Yamiguchi Nureginu.

He had certainly... achieved his objective.

Looking at that Houko-chan, once again, I could confidently believe it.

"Houko-chan."

I tried to call out to her once.

Houko-chan didn't respond.

Without any sign of reaction, her body was trembling.

As if she was cold.

As if she was in a world below freezing point.

Cold... frightened.

As if she was scared.

As if there was nothing she could rely upon.

Scared, freezing.

"Houko-chan!"

I approached Houko-chan and grabbed hold of her small shoulders, strongly turning her towards me. That may have been too rough and lacking in care for a patient, but I had no other way to make Houko-chan face me.

Houko-chan,

"Hih!"

She screamed.

And confirmed me.

"O..... Onii-chan."

"Yes."

".....Onii-chan."

"....."

Houko-chan,

making a very dismal face,

tightly.

She clung to me.

It almost looked like a ramming attack.

Her small body.

Grabbing my clothes strongly.

With her nails scratching into me, she grabbed me.

Her head,

the wound on her forehead, she pressed it on me.

"Ugh..... Uuuuuuuuugh."

She groaned.

"Nonsense user — Onii-chan."

".....Yes."

"I..... for a week, was pretty patient."

"....."

"You may not think that, bu-but, even then, in my own way, I think I shouldn't grieve the fact that Moeta... that Moeta died."

Houko-chan... was shaking.

"I thought it was fine like that and restrained, restrained myself."

"—Yes."

All of it.

I see then, all of it was to restrain herself. The actions that looked like self-mutilation, the rampaging — all of it was to restrain herself.

To endure... the pain.

It was probably necessary.

"But. That's why."

Houko-chan said.

"Can I cry now?"

"Yes."

".....!"

She grasped even tighter.

She didn't say anything, not even bawling or moaning,

Just letting tears flow, wailing silently.

Me too, silently,

I moved my hands around Houko-chan's back.

"Moeta was... by me..." Houko-chan said while weeping. More than saying that to me, she was saying it to herself. "I killed him."

"....."

"Not, because of me, I, with my hands, pushed him... I, made Moeta, fall on the railroad."

"....."

"I was—I did. I did!"

.....Aah.

Though it was too late, I understood.

Thinking back with what Nureginu-san said earlier in mind, unlike me or Houko-chan, who didn't divert our eyes from the railroad — Moeta-kun, looked up at us upon falling, perhaps he could have seen it.

Behind my back.

The one who pushed my back, Yamiguchi Nureginu.

I found it strange.

Though his arms were broken, Moeta-kun still may have been able to avoid that train — I found it suspicious that he didn't try.

But, if he had seen Yamiguchi Nureginu behind my back, Nureginu-san whose appearance has never been seen by anyone but his master, *Nureginu the Concealed*...

I'm sure he must have foreseen it.

He was... a clever boy.

If he died,

Houko-chan wouldn't have to be killed.

He understood it.

Therefore, he didn't struggle.

And made a satisfied face.

At the end, showing us such a smile.

Looking fulfilled.

Moeta-kun...

In two senses, he was protecting Houko-chan.

First, from the train, by reflex.

Then, from Nureginu-san, after consideration.

"I-I was, I was..... Onii-chan."

"....."

"Onii-chan..... Nonsense user Onii-chan..... anything, any..." Houko-chan got stuck on her words. But forcibly, with a small voice like an insect's cry, she continued. "Anything, I will do anything you want — so please, don't abandon me."

"....."

"I only have Onii-chan now."

Houko-chan continued monotonously.

"Though I am useless..... though I killed my brother..... though I am stupid, even then, I will live for Onii-chan's sake — so please, don't throw me away."

As if she was Emoto-san.

Emotionally unstable like Emoto-san.
However, since I know the normally strong Houko-chan,
I can't look at her like this.
"Please. Please..... have pity on me."
And,
Houko-chan continued to cry in silence.
Like a ghost, she was sobbing.
A child.
This girl is still... a child.
A mature thirteen year old — you can't just ignore it with those words.
That obvious fact,
I finally realized it.
It hurt.
I'm sure that for Houko-chan,
this was her first wound.
What was I thinking?
Did I think that Houko-chan was strong?
When Houko-chan proclaimed 'I can't stand looking at you getting hurt, so I will choose a path so that I get hurt', how could she use the strength to endure that as a ground to believe it?
She just couldn't endure looking at it.
She couldn't look at it.
She didn't have any grounds.
Her body just moved before she could think.
Because she didn't know pain yet.
Because she was at an age where she didn't know the pain of wounds.
A girl.
Thirteen years old.
Aah, then...
This was me.
The me of... the time I broke Kunagisa Tomo.
She was the same as me.
Rampaging, not being allowed to grieve.
Just blaming herself.
Being abandoned by everything.
It was me.
The old me who couldn't be saved.

The me who couldn't be saved by anyone.
The me who didn't save anyone.
The same me.
Then, without a doubt, pity is the right word.
"—It will be fine."
I, strongly,
so strongly that it must have been painful, hugged Houko-chan.
"I will always be at Houko-chan's side."
".....Onii-chan."
"I won't let Houko-chan go. I will protect Houko-chan. I like Houko-chan a lot. I love Houko-chan."
Words came out naturally.
I wanted to help Houko-chan.
I didn't want her... to do the same as me.
I couldn't make her do it.
"Also, you must not misunderstand — Houko-chan doesn't have just me. It would be too unfair for me to be the only one for Houko-chan. It wouldn't be enough at all. Then it wouldn't be equitable. Miiko-san and Nanananami and Koutoumaru are all here for Houko-chan. Everyone thinks you are necessary. That you are irreplaceable."
"....."
"That's why — why you can't talk about yourself like that. Don't look down on... someone important to me."
I love you.
Once more, I repeated it.
"Onii-chan—"
Houko-chan raised her face.
With all those tears, her beautiful face was a mess.
Frail, and pitiful.
I couldn't look,
but I couldn't avert my eyes.
"Please — don't.... hate me."
"Of course!"
I,
I yelled.
"That's — completely impossible."
".....Ah."

Houko-chan, suddenly, in an unbelievably quick motion, took her hands off of me, moved away, laid on the bed, covered herself with the sheets and hid herself.

.....?

For an instant I couldn't understand that action.

But,

"Th-thank you very much."

After hearing that from inside the sheets,

aah, she was bashful.

I understood.

She must have been thinking that she'd exposed a shameful sight.

I honestly thought she was cute.

"I-it's really just for now."

"Eh?"

"This me is just for now."

"....."

"I will immediately return to how I was."

".....I.... I see."

That was good.

I was relieved.

Right — it was fine like that.

Houko-chan must have been like that.

She could not be like me.

There shouldn't be anyone like me.

"Onii-chan." Then, Houko-chan said. "Is there anything I can do?"

".....For now, please rest well. Resting is important too."

"....."

"But when I need help, I will definitely ask you. At that time, please be useful to me."

"—No need to tell me."

Showing her face from the sheets, Houko-chan nodded.

Strongly, she nodded.

"I will do my best for you."

"Yes. I can't wait for those seven years to pass."

"....."

"Just joking. Then, I will come back again. Take care."

I felt regret, as I wanted to say more, but I didn't have a lot of time, so I only said that.

Houko-chan lightly swayed her hand,

and I left the room.

Closed the door.

Looked up at the ceiling.

Aah……

Take care, huh?

That reminds me, I'd only ever been visited by Houko-chan, so visiting her, it was the first time.

Hmm……..

It really didn't fit me…….

But, do your best.

That's where you must hold out, Houko-chan.

Don't become like me.

Your wound is only yours.

"……..Though — it's nonsense."

I must have been really tired, as my knees gave in.

With a sigh.

I leaned on a nearby wall.

"Yaay."

"……."

Rabumi-san was crouching right next to me.

With a mischievous look.

"……..What are you doing?"

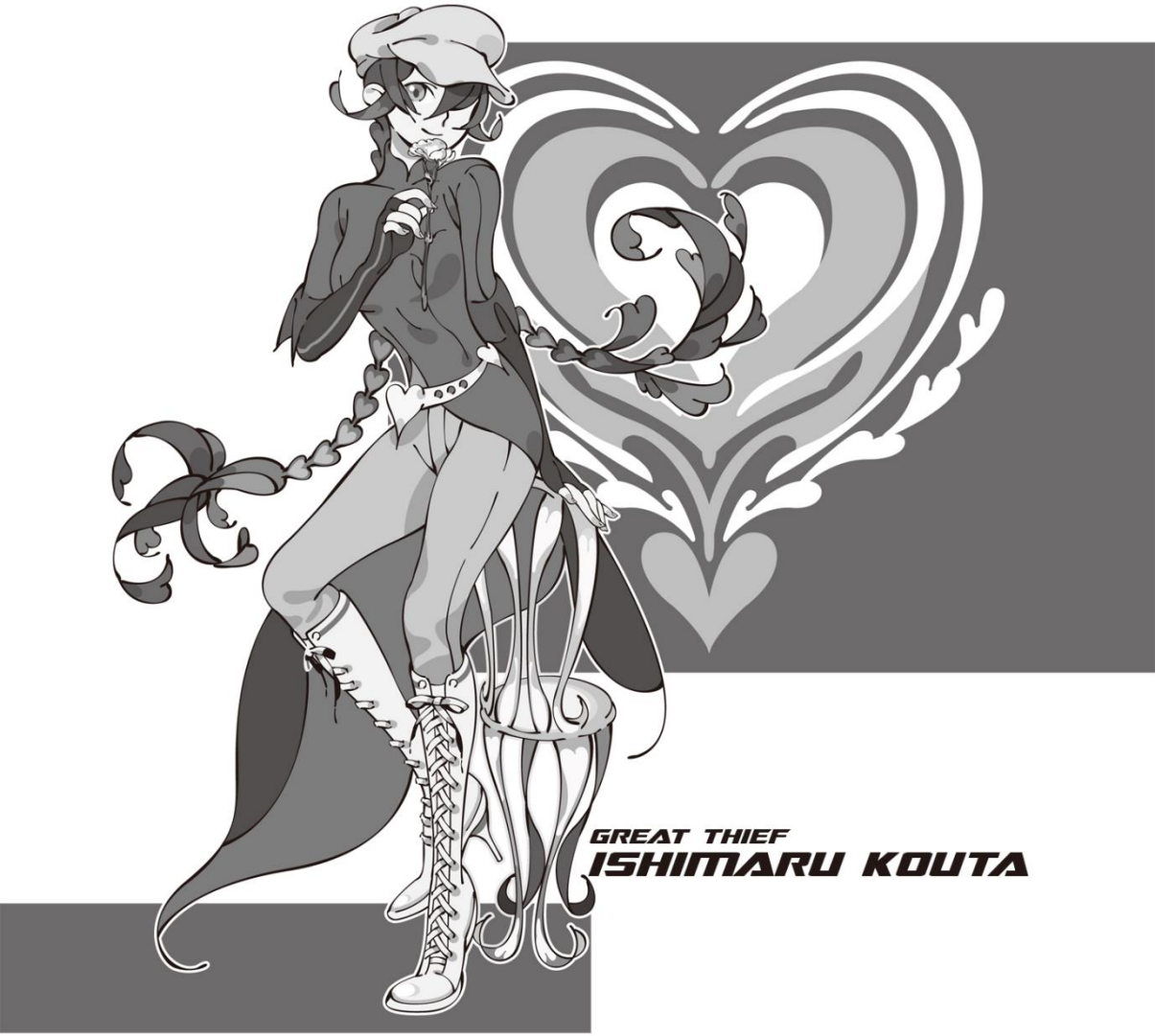
"What a nice story…… Big sister is moved."

"……."

She eavesdropped on us.

What an unpleasant ally.

ACT 12 - INSURANCE AND DEFENSE



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Teacher, I'm not feeling well.

1

By the way,

there was one problem I'd been neglecting.

That was Chiga Hikari.

The other day, Aikawa-san pointed out that the twenty-seven year old maid, who came for the last third of September, was not Chiga Hikari but, in fact, Chiga Teruko.

Raising numerous points, she claimed that. Well, at the time, I'd also thought that it might be the case, that it was surely the case — but in October, when she came to bring me clothes or take care of me in other ways, I began to feel that it might not have been the case.

Hikari-san might in fact have been Hikari-san, Chiga Hikari, I came to think that way.

Actually, those triplets have been vague from the start.

Overlapping with each other,

they were blurred triplets.

They were indistinct triplets.

No matter who was who, there wasn't much of a difference.

Also, in the first place, even if it was pointed out after the fact that Hikari-san was Teruko-san, it didn't mean much. No, not that it didn't mean anything. If that were the case, Hikari-san — Teruko-san may, like the old story of The Grateful Crane, have wanted to go back to Wet Crow's Feather Island as soon as possible. Well, even if she couldn't go home because of that, if she got found out, there wouldn't be any more reason for her to act as Hikari-san, so she would obviously return to her silent, inexpressive and

unfriendly attitude. She, who didn't speak to anyone and didn't listen to what anyone said; her usual self. Not to quote Aikawa-san, but even if she was Teruko-san, I still wished for her to continue acting like Hikari-san. Of course, Teruko-san was fine as herself, but in terms of living together, Hikari-san was clearly more preferable. In that case, there was no need to forcibly make her go back with logic.

Therefore.

She was still Chiga Hikari-san in my eyes.

Well..... I was already carrying numerous problems. Just this once, resolving it like that could be forgiven; to choose not to resolve it at all.

Holding on the conclusion.

That kind of vagueness was my speciality.

A sensation I was used to.

But a somewhat nostalgic feeling.

So, therefore—

"For now, congratulations on being discharged."

said Hikari-san.

Since maid clothes would stand out in the hospital, she was in plain clothes.

Tight jeans and a striped shirt.

Her hair was parted in two ways on both sides.

.....

Yaaahn.

"Then let's go, master."

"Yes..... I will be in your care."

"Would you like to go back to the apartment first?"

"Yes. It would be better to go straight there."

"Understood."

Said Hikari-san as she took my bags, left the hospital room, and guided me. It looked like she already took care of the procedure for being discharged at the reception. I was really bad at that kind of paperwork, so it was sincerely a great help.

After thanking the doctor that took care of me and, to be polite, Rabumi-san, we left the hospital and headed towards the parking lot.

Fiat 500.

Miiko-san's car — though recently it was almost exclusively meant for my private use.

Hikari-san went to the driver's seat without hesitation.

I went to the passenger seat.

"A hotel in Shinkyogoku, right?"

"Yes."

"Around Sanjou?"

"Exactly."

"So again, a private conversation in a hotel."

"So it seems."

"Hotels are nice."

"Right."

"Then."

Hikari-san started the car.

I would no longer ask about the unlicensed driving.

"Are your wounds already fine?"

"Yes. My body healing seven times faster than normal people's is one of the few things I can boast about."

"Your mind is also seven times more stubborn, isn't it?"

"Maybe." I shrugged jokingly. "Though I am a man that gets hurt seven times more than normal. In both body and spirit."

"That's good."

"For about one week, I'll restrain my eating habits somewhat. But after that, I should be completely fine."

"That is what's most important."

Hikari-san smiled like an angel.

Fuu.....

It was like my only bit of respite.

Thinking about the Great Thief I was about to meet, I was close to fainting.

"There is no greater delight than master being alright — how much of a risk do Asano-san and Yamiguchi-san have?"

"Yes. They will finally rest for a while. Miiko-san and Houko-chan will be staying hospitalized for the entire month. Houko-chan's wounds aren't that serious, but her mind is still unstable. Miiko-san too, even though she's no longer in critical condition, her body is still hurt all over."

To begin with, from what I heard from Rabumi-san after the fact, she was forcing herself quite a lot when she visited my room the day before yesterday. She said Miiko-san could barely walk, and a normal person wouldn't have been able to.

In her own way, she was not normal.

But, that being said.

"It's terrible."

Hikari-san said.

She had a sad expression.

Living together with me meant, of course, that she had made a connection with everybody at the apartment — for Hikari-san, Miiko-san and Houko-chan weren't strangers anymore.

It wasn't really to cheer her up, but I told Hikari-san,

"No — Well, you could say they are safe now. For a while, for a few months, they won't be out in the front line. From the *enemy's* viewpoint, there is no meaning in attacking them now. Thinking about it that way, retiring now is the best thing to do."

"I see. That's right."

"It should take about half a year for Miiko-san to train her body back, and Houko-chan — well, she probably won't be able to fight again."

As Yamiguchi Nureginu said.

And, I was sure, as Moeta-kun had planned.

And it was probably fine like this.

"By the way, Hikari-san, the real identity of Houko-chan and Moeta-kun..... Rather, the fact that they are *Killing Names*, didn't you realize?"

"No? I'd noticed."

"....."

Then..... tell me.

Always, every single time.

Well, setting that aside.

Hikari-san said distinctively.

"From my perspective, I am still interested in Aikawa-san. Missing once again."

"Yeah..... I guess."

The fox-masked man — Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

A father and daughter meeting for the first time in ten years. That being said, I couldn't think they had any catching up to do, nor that they had any heinous things to say to each other.

What was he planning?

What wasn't he planning?

Though I felt like it was just... a whim.

"She is not someone we should worry about, is what I said before, but with the situation being what it is, and the opponent being who he is — even if it's Aikawa-san, I still end up worrying."

"Right — huh, wait."

That reminded me.

Until now, I let it slide without finding it unnatural.

"Hikari-san, you call Aikawa-san by her surname?"

"Eh? Aah. Yes. What about it?"

"'What about it'.....?" Hikari-san, who said that, was naturally confused. "Aikawa-san hates being called by her surname, doesn't she?"

".....?"

Hikari-san was puzzled.

"Err, only enemies call her by her surname....."

"I have never been told that."

"....."

Huh?

.....What did that mean?

Hikari-san, rather, Iria-san and the others — their relationship with Aikawa-san shouldn't be this shallow, right? It had already been established for a few years.

So what did it mean?

Did she just miss the chance to do so?

"Is that something important?"

".....No. Well, I think it might be relatively trivial, but—"

I thought that, but — it was weird. This kind of small inconsistency was what always led me to failure in the end. Even I had learned that much, however, it not being that important was certainly correct.

Ummm.

Maybe she didn't say it to everyone?

"Even you call Aikawa-san by her last name, don't you? Or maybe, does master think that Aikawa-san is an enemy?"

"No..... it's not that. Well..... umm, right. I don't think it's something to worry over."

Answering that, I looked at Hikari-san and thought about something a little different. Rather than something else, it was the continuation of what I thought about earlier. But anyhow, the achievement of wounds, or maybe the irony of fate might fit, but with that, Houko-chan and Miiko-san were able

to exit this case — to exit the story of the fate between Saitou Takashi and me, so the sacrifice worked in the end — but that only means that the next one in danger would be the one currently driving this Fiat, Hikari-san.

Though it might have been Teruko-san.

No matter who she was, in a physical sense, she was the closest existence to me now. No one can argue against that.

She'd blended in before I knew it, and I'd already begun to think of her being here as obvious, but thinking normally, she should go back to the island as soon as possible.

At the very least, for her own sake.

Though I'd been thinking that at first, now I felt really grateful about her presence. When I'm too busy with something, I even forget how to simply *live*, and Hikari-san supported me well on that front.

Supported me,

and carried me.

I was grateful.

I'd been in her care a lot during my hospitalization.

Even now.

I was being helped in this situation.

Though it was not clear if she was Hikari-san or Teruko-san, a part of me didn't want to make that clear……

The Grateful Crane.

However, that being said,

Hikari-san probably really wanted to leave.

For Hikari-san,

the world was only that Wet Crow's Feather Island. So in that sense, Nureginu-san's view and Hikari-san's view had a lot in common.

Though their worlds were different, their thinking was the same huh.

Of course, for Hikari-san too, she was here by order of her **master**, and not because she wished to, so it might have been wrong for me to complain about that.

But, at some point, I should properly get to the bottom of that……

Well, including Hikari-san,

my surroundings…

Assuring security around me was important.

For that reason, I understood well that I shouldn't spare my efforts this time from both Houko-chan and Miiko-san's cases, as well as Moeta-kun and Izumu-kun's.

The security of my surroundings came back around to my safety.

Let's comprehend it like this.

Not as lip service, but on top of the egoistic understanding.

I must properly protect it.

"You worry too much, master."

And,

Hikari-san said to my thinking silently.

"It has already been more than half a month since I started serving master, but — master has a tendency to think too seriously about everything."

"Serious? Me?"

"Yes." Hikari-san nodded. "It may be rude, but I thought that master was more frivolous."

"I am... frivolous."

"Then maybe I should say you put too much load onto your shoulders."

"Load... onto my shoulders."

"You should relax more. I think seven or eight times the load is enough in master's case."

".....Am I just clumsy in the end?"

"If that is the best method for master, I will not insist on it. But, if you want to relax or rejuvenate, please call me. Unskilled I may be, I will do my best." Hikari-san said, smiling. "Though it has been a long time, I am good at pleasing and relieving men."

"Hmm..... is that so?"

.....

Wait.

.....Was I being seduced?

Was I being tempted!?

"Hi-Hikari-san."

"Ah. We've arrived."

Hikari-san pulled the brakes in front of the hotel.

I was suddenly pitched forward.

.....It was a beautiful shoulder throw.

.....

Certainly..... I may have been able to relax.

"Then, I will go park the car in the parking lot, so don't worry and take your time, master."

".....I will do that." I opened the door and got off the driver's seat. Since I sat on the right, I was a bit nervous. "But I'll just make a request, so it shouldn't take that much time."

"Understood."

"Then."

Closing the door, seeing Hikari-san off,

I looked at the big hotel.

Ishimaru Kouta,

the hotel chosen by Kouta-san.

The diplomatic hotel near Shinkyogoku.

"....."

Two months ago.

The hotel I'd been called to by Assistant Professor Kigamine.

The same hotel I'd been called to.

It's not like it all began there.

The beginning in itself had taken place way before that.

But,

even then, that hotel was one of the focus points.

For the world.

For the Story.

The first day of August was a focal point.

Though I thought it was by chance.

I don't think Kouta-san had any reason to expressly choose that hotel, so it was probably just a coincidence, but I still ended up feeling a strange connection..... The meeting place was also the tea room on the first floor..... That being said, it was too subtle to be one of that ill-natured Kouta-san's pranks. Unlike Hikari-san, who was backed by the Akagami Conglomerate, I couldn't think the same of the independent Great Thief, Ishimaru Kouta, but she probably hadn't picked it at random, either.....

I had a bad feeling.

Thinking that, I entered the hotel,

ignored the front,

and went straight to the tea room.

Kouta-san — she was already there.

Denim all over her body.
A hunting hat.
High laced boots.
Puffing her cheeks like a child, she seemed discontent and highly displeased.
Maybe she was not in a good mood.
.....Don't lose your nerves.
That being said, if I kept wandering around the entrance of a tea shop like that, I might get called out by a waiter, so, restraining my fright, I headed towards where Kouta-san sat.
For Assistant Professor Kigamine,
Where had I been seated again?
I didn't remember that much, huh?
".....My, dear friend." Kouta-san was the one to call out to me first. "You look well. How consummate."
"Kouta-san too, you look to be in quite a good mood."
"Does it look like that?"
"No, sorry. I got carried away."
While I apologized immediately upon meeting, I sat in front of Kouta-san. Since a waiter came, I ordered a coffee. As if exchanging a promise, as if it were an implicit understanding, until that coffee arrived, not a word had been uttered between me and Kouta-san.
I took a small sip of coffee.
".....However."
I looked around.
Since it was noon on a weekday, the clients were sparse.
Though they were sparse—
"Still, how should I say it, wouldn't it have been better to meet up in a closed room?"
"That would just be useless, temporary peace of mind, dear friend. It is clear that, even if we just spoke a bit, all of your actions would end up leaking to **the other side**. Therefore, being wary would just be tiring."
"But....."

Certainly, since even the time I spoke to Hikari-san in a hotel owned by the Akagami Conglomerate, though it took a while, it ended up reaching the fox-masked man's ears.

"It's just, I don't know about being that careless."

"That's why it is fine. If we're careless, the more careless we are, the better. 'Hide a tree in the forest' — this kind of unwise expression doesn't work with the Great Thief. If it were me, I would hide the tree in front of the public, dear friend."

".....Well, I can't go against you."

I was the one who wanted to request something.

Also — at least, the spy from *Thirteen Stairs*, Yamiguchi Nureginu of the same house as Houko-chan, is no longer my enemy. Maybe the risk concerning that has lowered a bit.

"So — well, since it's Kouta-san, I think you already understand most of the situation happening around me, but—" Aikawa-san said she heard it from Kouta-san too, so I could avoid explaining the details. "—even if Aikawa-san has gone missing again, honestly, I'm in a bind."

"So, are you saying that finding the demonic killer Zerozaki Hitoshiki is necessary and essential to break off that deadlock-like situation? Dear friend."

"Rather....."

I felt some thorns in her words.

It pricked.

Though I could get it.

"It's... for insurance, to be honest."

"Insurance?"

"The person currently opposing me — well, it's Aikawa-san's father, Saitou Takashi....."

"Yes. I am aware."

"It seems that, at first, it wasn't me, but Zerozaki Hitoshiki that he intended to make his enemy. Though it may not have been something as concrete as a plan. Regardless, because Saitou Takashi was searching for *Zerozaki Hitoshiki*, he ended up finding me."

"I see. Even I didn't know the situation around that, dear friend. That *fox* being alive is already a surprise, but why would he make an ordinary person such as you his enemy? I can't fathom it."

"Yes."

"Although, at this point, it is dubious whether we can call you an amateur or ordinary person."

"I too came to find that setting absurd recently. So, what should we do, Kouta-san? If you're going to search for Aikawa-san again, could you search for Zerozaki Hitoshiki while you're at it?"

".....That is not 'while you're at it' at all, dear friend. My workload would simply double." Kouta-san seemed really irritated. She didn't even try to hide it. "It is like being told to go to the beach while on your way to the mountain. Except, if there was any tight connection between Zerozaki Hitoshiki and Aikawa-san—"

"It's not like there isn't any. In May, those two fought at least once, probably twice even."

"....."

Kouta-san went silent.

That too — did she not know it?

I thought that she might have known.

".....I want to ask for reference." Eventually, Kouta-san said, while pressing her head with her index finger, as if she had a headache. "What kind of impression do you have of the Zerozaki clan?"

"Err....."

Faced with Kouta-san's question, I simply repeated what I'd heard from the fox-masked man and Moeta-kun. Treating their family exceedingly well, a group of demonic killers killing without any objective. Kouta-san looked awfully fed up as she sighed, followed by a scornful laughter.

".....That impression is too soft for the Zerozaki clan. Though it is correct, it is not the whole truth. The idea that it is simply a group of friendly demonic killers is completely lacking, dear friend."

"Haaah....."

Certainly, that was just speaking with words. For someone with actual fighting experience, like Kouta-san, it really was just an armchair theory. A carefree opinion from a safe place. That being said, I'd met Zerozaki without having any idea that he was part of such an absurd clan, so my first impression differs from other people's to a certain degree.

"That reminds me, I remember someone fearlessly naming themselves a so-called Zerozaki Itoshiki."

"Ahh, yes, there was such a person."

Kouta-san nodded curtly.

It seems she didn't want that topic to be touched on.

Anyhow, Kouta-san fixed her posture.

"Even if she is Aikawa Jun, her fighting a member of the Zerozaki Clan — it's not a rumor that could spread around casually. The only ones who know about that are probably Aikawa-san, that Zerozaki Hitoshiki guy she fought, and you."

"Is that so."

In reality, Kunagisa had been nearby when we talked about that, so she knew, but it was not something that I needed to expressly comment on.

"Fighting Aikawa Jun, huh..... did he survive?"

"There's word that he died then, or that he managed to survive. I heard both."

Furthermore, *from the same person*.

Since it was complicated, I kept that a secret.

"Hmm..... Well, if those are the circumstances, that Zerozaki Hitoshiki person..... could become a useful hint to search Aikawa Jun — maybe."

"Yes..... he would be **a hint for Aikawa-san and for Saitou Takashi**."

"Do you have any guesses?"

"Houston — the ER3 System in Houston, Texas is, well, really suspicious, I guess."

"How vague."

"It is vague."

"How random."

"It isn't random."

".....Well, I will look into that as well, just in case. However." Kouta-san glared at me. "The objective — what is it? Your objective. Asking me to search for Zerozaki Hitoshiki, I don't understand your reason behind it."

"....."

"In the first place, what is the connection between you?"

"An Alternative it seems."

"What?"

She let out a hysteric voice.

Well..... if you didn't know about the fox-masked man's philosophy, you couldn't understand what I'd said. Even if you did, most people wouldn't get what he was saying either.

"It's not like we're friends, but we were associated back in May."

".....Maybe that is it? He didn't want to be Aikawa-san's father's, Saitou Takashi's, enemy, so he put up a substitute and fled? Dear friend."

"If he could do something like that, I'd give him full marks, since that's the ideal scenario, but it'd be impossible to see that far ahead. However, it could serve as an **upset**."

"An upset."

"Therefore, insurance." I said. "Also — the thing that is called destiny. In this case, destiny is very important. While, for me, destiny is nothing more than random chance—"

Like, this hotel.

Where I first talked to Assistant Professor Kigamine.

Like this hotel.

"—for Saitou Takashi, that's definitely not the case. Destiny exists without a doubt. If it doesn't, he'll create it. He's that kind of person."

"Outrageous, he is."

"Outrageous, yes. But, because of that — there is one for sure. **A link between Saitou Takashi and Zerozaki Hitoshiki**. At the very least, something that Saitou Takashi would call a link — something that should exist and which cannot be shaken."

"Cannot be... shaken."

"Therefore, an upset."

At the very least, it was enough of a breakthrough to serve as insurance, and there should've been something that made me confident enough to think that.

Between Saitou Takashi and I, between the Nonsense User and the fox-masked man, even before Aikawa Jun — there was the connection of Omokage Magokoro. Similarly, between Zerozaki Hitoshiki and Saitou Takashi, between the demonic killer and the fox-masked man, in addition to Aikawa Jun, there should've been something.

There must have been something.

For the fox-masked man.

If that wasn't the case, his logic would break down.

The breakdown of the world.

The breakdown of fate — the breakdown of the Story.

If I was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative,

it must have been like that.

"Then — **we can use that connection**. That connection, which is already unnecessary for Saitou Takashi, depending on how we use it, can become a weapon. That's what I think."

".....How typical of you."

Kouta-san said, as she looked part fed up and part impressed.

"First the weak point — right?"

"Yes."

"Forgetting his enemy, not being aware, deciding it unnecessary; using that as a weapon to break through — it is truly befitting of you, dear friend."

"My weapon — it was and forever will only be my words."

"That's nonsense, isn't it?"

"Well, it is."

".....Understood." Kouta-san nodded. "As long as you are fine with the investigation of Zerozaki Hitoshiki only being on the side of searching for Aikawa Jun, I will sign the contract."

"Contract, huh."

"Stealing that woman's title is consummate too."

Kouta-san smiled boldly.

I,

purposely stayed silent, before offering words of gratitude.

"Sorry to bother you."

"I don't mind. That debt will eventually be promptly repaid."

"Yes, once everything's over and we're both fine, I'll do anything you want then... Honestly, I'm relieved. Not all of it is gone, but I feel like I've taken off half the baggage I carry. Because, if you refused, I wouldn't have anyone else to ask."

"Why me, though?"

"From what I know, you're the only one able to find Aikawa Jun on your own. You're the only one fit to be Aikawa Jun's rival. That's, as you said."

"....."

"Since this is a secret affair, I can't possibly ask for an organization's help — insurance also means a trump card, so it not being exposed is crucial. Taking that into account, there is no one else other than you I can ask this to."

"How splendid that you valued me so high, dear friend."

Kouta-san said, as if dealing with a child, but she didn't seem dissatisfied. Those were definitely my real thoughts, not just lip-service, but Kouta-san's a person with a lot of self-respect, so she may be surprisingly easy to handle.

"If I may add something, you're the only one with enough guts to get involved with the Zerozaki Clan. Though Kouta-san said so, it's not like I'm asking it carefreely. I knew that anyone else would be too scared of the Zerozaki Clan, so I asked you."

".....Insurance, that is what you called it. Then, obviously, you have another plan prepared?"

"Yes. Offense and defense, one for each."

".....Offense, and defense, huh." Kouta-san said meaningfully. "Since you lived for a few years in America, you have some experience with baseball, right?"

"At least. I know baseball's rules too."

"I am talking about a certain pitcher. That pitcher excelled over every other pitcher in all fields. One time, a journalist asked 'Why are you so outstanding?', that kind of off the mark question... What do you think he said?"

"Because of his effort..... or because of his talent, something like that?"

"No."

Kouta-san said.

"Because he thinks of throwing the ball against the batter as an attack — right. From the start, what this guy sees is completely different from small fries who think that getting a strikeout is defense."

"....."

"Dear friend. If you have resolved yourself to fight, you should stop using soft and lukewarm words like attack or defense. It is unsightly."

Well, I don't intend to fight even one bit, so I can use them however much I want, said Kouta-san—

Taking the tab, she stood up.

Without saying goodbye, I looked at her back until she wasn't visible anymore.

Really.....

People working behind the scenes could say whatever they want. I was jealous.

Well, I originally was practically behind the scenes.

An observer, huh.

"I am counting on you, Kouta-san."

I said, after a pause,

I finished drinking my coffee,

And left the tea shop.

Towards the hotel's parking lot.

Now, I didn't have time — it wasn't like that, but no matter how much time I had on my hands, it wasn't enough, so after seeing Kouta-san not taking it lightly and leaving quickly, I searched for the Fiat standing out in the parking lot. When I approached it, intending to knock on the window.

In the driver's seat, Hikari-san was sleeping.

Drowsily.

Dozing off.

Closing her eyes.

Without even breathing, peacefully.

"....."

Softly,

so as to not make noise, I went away from the car.

And hid myself in the shadow of a nearby pillar.

"Yes..... Of course."

That's..... Of course.

It didn’t matter whether she was Hikari-san or Teruko-san — if she took care of me all day long, she wouldn't have time to rest.....

I felt sorry.

From the bottom of my heart, I felt sorry.

But.....

But.

Even then..... for just a little more.

I wanted to rely on her.

I wanted her to... support me.

After that, I left the hotel and went around Shinkyogoku to kill time, and, after spending about two hours at a game center, I came back to the parking lot once again.

"Sorry. The story went for a little too long."

"No, I do not mind. It went by in a blink of an eye."

"I guess."

"What?"

"Please get the car out."

"Ah, yes. Where should we go next?"
"Kunagisa's building, please."
I said.
"You remember the way, right?"

2

Ii-chan is like boku-sama-chan's wife who lives elsewhere, said Kunagisa, still showing her back.

"Sorry that I couldn't come to visit you again."

"It's fine. It wasn't that serious of an injury anyway."

On the floor, so covered with cords and cables that there was nowhere to put my feet, I was sitting cross-legged, looking at the back of the girl sitting on a chair and typing on a total of eight keyboards and seventeen computers.

"It kinda feels..... like you're more busy than ever."

"Yes."

"If you admit it, then you must be really busy."

"Yes."

".....No amiability, huh."

"Yes."

Uwaah.

It was hard to voice my request.

".....What are you playing around with this time? You seem awfully focused, or rather engrossed. I hope you're not thinking of doing any mischief like before, are you?"

"Mmm. Speaking of like before, it is like before, but more than simply like before, I guess it's even more like before."

"What? Now how many times did you say 'before'?"

"Four times."

"Yeah....."

"In other words, work for the Kunagisa Syndicate."

Kunagisa said.

Though she didn't turn back and wasn't being as friendly as usual, it was still impressive that her work efficiency didn't drop at all while speaking.

"Has it been six years? Or maybe a bit more? Anyway, since boku-sama-chan is returning to the Kunagisa Syndicate, I need to lend a hand to help Nao-kun."

"Aah, it's about that. Then it's not just playing around, but proper work."

"Mmm. Not exactly. The official return is still some time away. There are some bothersome formalities to do, but Nao-kun is in charge of that. What boku-sama-chan is doing is preparation for that."

"Preparation?"

"Preparing work."

"Hmm. I see."

"Incompetent people, you see."

"What?"

"There were incompetent people."

"I see."

"And a lot of them. Only incompetent people."

".....It's really rare for you to directly call someone incompetent..... Choose a softer way to say it. If someone competent like you speaks so negatively, it sends a bad image."

"But, I mean. All the systems and programs I created more than six years ago, those incompetents just jumbled them all up. Two days ago, I thought of preparing a bit early, I made up my mind and even though it was lighthearted at that time, what a pain."

"Yeah....."

I see.

While Kunagisa was isolated from the Kunagisa Syndicate, the people from the Kunagisa Syndicate could not handle what she left behind — that 'lost technology', if you were to put it grandly — and after fiddling with it, they ended up powering it down. Since Kunagisa's engineering abilities were more artistic than just genius-like, I could understand her being upset if someone created a poor man's version of her work. Like the juvenile version of 'Anne of Green Gables'. But 'lost technology' was an exaggeration, and since it was estimated as overtechnology, you couldn't really blame the guys from the Syndicate in this case. Since I'd thought that, though I had no obligation to, I said "Isn't it fine?" to defend whom Kunagisa called *incompetents*.

"That level of work, take it as rehab to prepare for your return. If you end up working inside an organization, you'll always get dragged down. From your perspective, it's not even hard work, is it?"

"It's a pain because I don't understand what those incompetents thought when they were doing it. The reasons and causes are important. That's why, even if the task itself is easy, researching the cause takes time. Aah,

incompetents, incompetents, incompetents, incompetents! I hate incompetents! I'll tell Nao-kun to get them all fired."

"....."

Aah..... How nostalgic.

I see, it wasn't rare, but nostalgic.

That reminded me, that was the kind of person she was.

Long ago.

While she was still in the Kunagisa Syndicate.

Before — getting expelled.

I'd completely forgotten.

Professor Kyouichirou must have had a hard time.

But well, seeing her getting in high spirits working on something, it was much better and healthier compared to the time she had zero life energy and was just lying in bed all day.

She'd really become healthier, I thought.

Now it should be fine, I thought.

It was good, I thought.

It was good — I thought that from the bottom of my heart.

"Just watch! I'll construct a system so perfect that no one other than boku-sama-chan can handle it."

"Then your objective would be unclear."

Putting the cart before the horse.

Zero life energy was still zero life energy, huh.

"Organizations kill individuality, after all. It's not the kind of place creators should be in. You can't just stay stoic inside an organization. So if that's the case, you should be the one to adjust."

"Humph! But that wasn't the case at all in *Team*."

"But you couldn't really call that an organization, could you?"

"Uni."

I thought I was right, but Kunagisa went silent.

Saying that she'd never felt any distress in her life save for the few years when she was putting together *Team*, she talked about her hardships..... Utsurigi, for example, was the number one you shouldn't make your subordinate.

Umm.

Then, it must've been hard for the fox-masked man too.

But in that man's case, it was like he neglected or set the *Thirteen Stairs* totally free.

"....."

By the way, Hikari-san was once again waiting in the parking lot.

Since, if she'd met Kunagisa, it would've become clear whether she was Hikari-san or Teruko-san, before she had the chance to say anything, I told her "I need to talk about something secret, so I'm sorry, but could you wait here again?".

What I needed to talk about wasn't much of a secret though — even then, well.

Me having something secret to talk about wasn't a total lie.

".....How long do you think your work will take?"

"Today's already done for. I can't believe it. Those frightening incompetents! Huh, that reminds me, Ii-chan, why'd you come here? Wasn't your private life a complete mess?"

"Yes."

I said.

"I have a request."

"Accepted."

Kunagisa stopped her hands and faced me.

"What should I do?"

"Mainly, defense."

"Defense?"

"Guarding."

"Hmm."

"Using the Kunagisa Syndicate's power to its maximum — I want you to protect anyone that had any connection to me in the countries I've been to."

".....Protect, huh."

Kunagisa —

repeated my words meaningfully.

As if she'd noticed it all.

"Yeah."

I clearly nodded.

"Before, it was just you. But before I knew it, I made quite a few people I want to protect."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"I wonder. I feel like I've become weaker."

"That's not a bad thing."
Kunagisa chuckled.

"Ii-chan never changes."

"……Is that so?"
"Yes."
Kunagisa said.
"Ii-chan just said 'before I knew it', but in reality, it's probably been that way since way back. Ii-chan was always trying to protect everyone — trying to protect everyone around you — and boku-sama-chan was simply one amongst them. That's what I've always thought."
"Really……. I mean, you've always had such a stupid idea? How ridiculous — ridiculous." I was perplexed by Kunagisa's words. "It's not like that. Before, I was — surely, trying to break everyone. I wanted everyone to disappear."
Six years ago.
Kunagisa Syndicate.
Kunagisa Tomo.
Little sister…
"It's not like that. It's not like that at all."
"……."
"Because you were everyone's Ii-chan, Boku-sama-chan wanted to make you solely my Ii-chan. To be honest."
"……At the very least, even since way before, I've always been yours. That still hasn't changed at all. Certainly, it may never change."
"Fishy line."
"I'm being serious."
To the joking Kunagisa, I said.
"If you manage to return to the Kunagisa Syndicate, and if I manage to return alive from the worthless trouble I'm currently facing."
"What?"
"Let's get married."
"Buhoh!"
Kunagisa spat out.
Cough cough, she coughed with all her strength.
……An unexpected reaction.

Rather, she broke into a laugh.
Shivering and looking down, covering her abdomen.
Umm……
Death by laughter must be painful.
Rather, why was she laughing…….
"Wh…… what's that?"
"It's the first time I've seen you acting like this….."
"I'm just taken aback."
"No…… Since you and I are no longer frozen in the same spot, like, wouldn't it be better to have something concrete like that? Something concrete and unchanging, in that sense, might be necessary."
"……Seriously?"
"Yes. A proposal."
"It's sudden."
"Because I just thought of it."
"Nonsense?"
"Not….. nonsense."
"Marrying between friends?"
"Isn't it fine? I like you."
"If you were to marry boku-sama-chan, Ii-chan…… this time you really would be taken in by the Kunagisa Syndicate."
"……I don't mind."
I nodded.
"In itself, it might be good."
"……You really don't change."
It seems Kunagisa finally calmed down.
She corrected her posture.
"It was the case six years ago too."
"Maybe. Though I don't remember that time now."
"When Ii-chan says something, he sure is stubborn."
"Maybe. Though I don't remember that time now."
Nor did I want to remember though.
"Yes. Got it."
Kunagisa turned back towards her computers.
To her back, I said.
"When everything's over, let's get married."
"Yes."

Very naturally,

A normal conversation.

"Wait until my birthday. Let's do it after we both turn twenty. What will you do about university?"

"I don't mind continuing, but if I were to be affiliated with the Syndicate, I'd have to give up. A university diploma doesn't mean anything to that organization."

"I think it'll be fine. If we're talking about that, isn't there something more troublesome to take care of?"

"What is it?"

"It'll be Ii-chan's job to persuade Nao-kun."

"……..No way. Absolutely not. You do it."

"Even boku-sama-chan doesn't want to. I definitely won't. That should be your nonsense's turn."

"Umm……."

Well, that may be the case.

But Nao-san…….

That guy is quite a siscon.

"Well….. That's for if everything goes right. It's already so much of a pain, so if I don't prepare a reward at the end, I wouldn't be able to do it."

"A reward for you. Being boku-sama-chan?"

"For me, there isn't a better reward than that. You're always my number one."

"You talk big. Even though you ran away once."

"……."

Kunagisa giggled.

"I absolutely don't hate you for what happened six years ago, and I don't think it was your fault, but about you running away after that, boku-sama-chan may be a bit angry."

"……It's better than being forgiven easily."

Being forgiven — hurt more than anything.

It's been the case since way back.

Not changing went for you too.

"So, at the very least, be angry about that."

"……..I've wanted to ask for a while. Why did Ii-chan come back from the ER3 System?"

"……."

"Without even graduating. Dropping out."

"I wanted to see you — was one of the reasons."

"Which means there was something else, right?"

".....A friend, you see."

I answered, making myself seem as composed as possible.

"Because a friend died."

"....."

"Because of me — they died."

The Orange Seed.

Omokage Magokoro.

MS-2.

"'No matter where I am, no matter what I do, it's the same.' That's what I thought at the time."

"That's why you came back?"

"Wanting to settle the past."

"It's hard to understand. For boku-sama-chan."

"Yeah. I guess." I nodded and continued talking to Kunagisa's back. "Therefore, in the end, I came back to Japan to see you. Among the friends that died because of me, you were the only one to still be alive."

Kunagisa too — like Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

Even though they should've been dead, even though they were killed,

even though I'd broken her,

and killed her,

she lived.

She'd managed to stay alive.

"....."

Saitou Takashi said that Kajou Akira lived on in his heart.

As was my little sister, deeply rooted inside me.

But, however.

Then, for me, Omokage Magokoro...

"With you..... you and I..... no, what I did to you — the sins I committed to you, to repent....."

"Those sins no longer exist, and didn't I say they never existed from the start?" Kunagisa said. "If you say you proposed for that reason, it's irritating, so take it back."

".....Aah, no. In reality, it's not something that complicated. In the end, I just like being beside you the most. It's just that."

"Beside boku-sama-chan, huh." Kunagisa said, weirdly. "Then beside boku-sama-chan is Ii-chan's reserved seat. I will leave it permanently open for Ii-chan."

"I'm thankful."

"Ii-chan's side too, leave it open. Uni, it's become pretty noisy around Ii-chan compared to before."

".....True. Why it became like this, I have no idea."

"Uni. Well, I get it. Leave the defense to me. Protecting them means that it's better if the people in question don't notice, right?"

"Yeah. I don't want them to know too much. And I don't want them to worry needlessly. It would be a pain if they tried to meddle in response. I'm not saying it's crucial, but please try as much as possible not to be noticed."

"Ii-chan doesn't need bodyguards?"

"Yes. I'll be fine. Rather, that would make it harder to move." I said. "Also, I don't think I need to tell you, but don't forget your own protection. Though I don't think anything could happen in this building—"

Even then,

this place is known by the fox-masked man.

There is no such thing as too much caution.

"—You are my Achilles heel..... or rather, my lifeline. The other side — the ones currently considering me an enemy know that."

Whether they would actually do anything was pretty iffy.

Unclear.

"Not only the protection of the Kunagisa Syndicate, if possible — let me see. Right, you should call your allies from your *Team* days. If it's for your sake, those guys would rush in without needing to hear it twice."

"Hmm. Right. That may be good too..... I think getting everyone will be impossible, but I guess I'll try to call them. Is there anything else boku-sama-chan can do?"

"No. Also, I think the information war phase is already over. So, for now, what you should prioritize the most is your own safety. Aah..... right. If it comes to it, I may have to use this place to hide. At that time, I'll rely on you to cover me."

"Cover Ii-chan?"

"Perhaps, though it could be someone else. Currently, there's no place safer than here for me. So you too, stay here as much as possible. As usual, be a hikikomori."

"Understood."

"....."

"Uni? What? You look puzzled."

"No..... it's like, how should I say it."

It seemed... I was in an indescribable mood, untying my legs and, for some reason, trying to sit on my knees.

I scratched my head.

"Kind of anticlimactic..... Rather, I was surprised that you accepted it so easily. I thought that you'd have a lot of things to say, so..... Err, how should I say it....."

"It makes it difficult?"

"Well....."

"Spare me, Ii-chan. I've never even once refused one of Ii-chan's requests, have I? I'm really happy that Ii-chan decided to rely on me. I said it clearly, didn't I, **that Ii-chan directly involving me** — it makes me honestly happy."

"That may be true..... But, if you talked about destroying the Earth again, I don't know what I would've done....."

"Ahaha, Ii-chan remembers that even with your memory. That was obviously a joke."

"A joke....."

"You shouldn't take every little thing boku-sama-chan says seriously. I wanted to liven things up, so I just said it on the spot. But, well, this boku-sama-chan should grow up too. Soon — soon, I will return to the organization, properly help Nao-kun and try to make him accept it."

Kunagisa turned her head towards me.

"So, for better or for worse, I can't continue like this. I'll stop only saying selfish things."

".....Hmm."

If she said that,

I could only nod.

"Though I also feel that it's not like you. Well, it's probably the right thing to do, though....."

"It would have been fine when I was in a *stoppage*, but if I am to *grow*, it's different. It's not the time to get desperate."

"Desperate."

It was probably... about her *Team* days.

A time I didn't know about,

about Kunagisa Tomo.

".....Then, for now, you should stop trying to get those incompetents fired. I said so earlier, but that's what being part of an organization, being an adult, means."

"Right. That may be true. That's surely the case. Then I will forgive that, too. If Ii-chan says so. Yes, it might not be bad work for my instincts, which have grown dull while I was unemployed. But, well, but—" With a somewhat heavy tone, melancholically, Kunagisa continued. "Boku-sama-chan should try to do other things properly too, from now on."

"Other things? What kind of things?"

"Other things. Other things are other things. Other things are, for now, trying to understand the pain of Ii-chan's wounds—"

Saying that,

Kunagisa frivolously let out a loose smile.

"I'm beaten."

"Yes."

"I guess Jun-chan was the trigger."

"Yeah?"

"Mmm. Ii-chan...." Kunagisa said. "Since Ii-chan doesn't change — he changes."

"....."

"I'm beaten."

Kunagisa frivolously,

let out a loose smile.

3

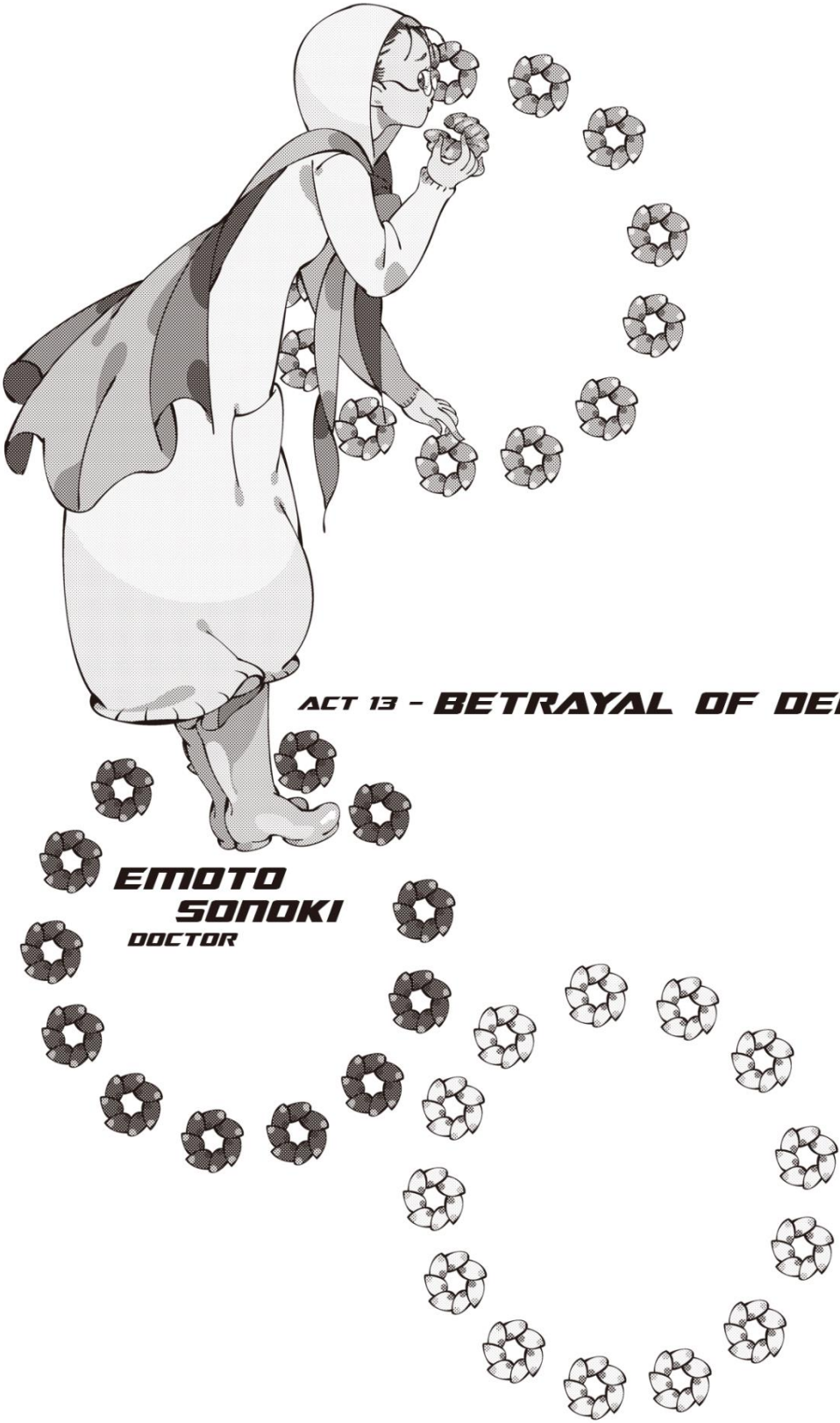
I returned to the apartment.

Since Moeta-kun died and Houko-chan and Miiko-san were at the hospital, only Nanananami and Koutoumaru-san were currently living here. On a Monday, at this hour, those two should be away. Alongside Hikari-san, I climbed the stairs, passed by the door of Miiko-san's room, unlocked the door of my room, and entered.

"……..Eh?"

Orange hair.

Omokage Magokoro was there.


ACT 13 - BETRAYAL OF DENIAL
EMOTO
SONOKI
DOCTOR

0

Something you can't see isn't there.

1

She liked places with few people.

Judging from her personality, she probably wouldn't come out somewhere with a lot of people. Also, even if that were not the case, she stood out too much. Setting her personality aside, her appearance was too graceful.

That being said, it wouldn't be right for her to be left unattended either.

It would have been too dangerous when the time came.

She wanted to avoid danger.

Somewhere with a reasonable amount of people, and furthermore, somewhere well ventilated, where she could look around — therefore, in this case, not a hotel or a tea shop, where we could talk privately. Thinking of the risk, somewhere outside would be best.

At the end of my thinking.

I chose the Kyoto Imperial Garden as the meeting spot.

A national garden with the Kyoto Imperial Garden as its center.

It would soon be mid October, so even though we were in the season of beautiful maple trees, the tourists were sparse. On top of that, it was excessively spacious, so I did not know any place more fitting than that in Kyoto. Since Roushisha University, which Nanananami attends, was just next door, I had a few chances to visit when I took a walk with her or sat on a bench and read. I won't say I owned the place, but I was somewhat used to this park.

Well, the Imperial Garden was a wide place, so, more specifically, I chose the area in front of the Keirenmon. There were benches everywhere here, so we wouldn't have any trouble finding a place to talk. I transmitted that we should use the enormous aphananthe tree as a marker.

It wouldn't be respectful to go empty handed, so instead of coming straight from the apartment, I deviated a bit from my route and bought ten donuts from a nearby Mister Donuts (since it was on sale, it ended up costing only 525 yen without tax), then reached the Kyoto Imperial Garden.

Meeting time, ten minutes before three in the afternoon.

It was a pleasant day.

By the way, I hadn't used the Fiat today, but my own two feet.

Humans need to walk every once in a while.

Hikari-san — hadn't come with me today.

She was taking care of *her* at the apartment.

.....

A bit unpleasant.

Even though she was my maid.

No, well, when considering the person I was about to meet, bringing Hikari-san would just make things more difficult. And, above all else, I would've been too worried leaving *her* somewhere we couldn't see.

Now.

Straight from Nakadachiuri to the Imperial Garden.

Upon reaching the palace and turning to the right,

I came to see the aphananthe tree,

and passed it,

going left at the next branch road, Keirenmon—

"....."

Raincoat.

Wearing a white raincoat with thick fabric and long hems, the front zip and buttons closed firmly as if rejecting something and, to top it all off, as if saying 'how about that', wearing the hood tightly over her head, standing upright and looking down, there was a female figure.

I'll say it just in case, but it wasn't raining.

Clear weather.

.....

However, she had rubber boots on.....

Yellow rubber boots.

Actually, I didn't understand at all.

Around the Kenreimon, there wasn't anyone but her.

It was way less populated than usual.

.....As I said, being left unattended was a problem.

I thought about going home after that, but I couldn't really do that. So, resolving myself, as amiably as possible, in an unconcerned manner,

"Ah, Emoto-san. You're early."

While trotting over to her, I called out in a bright voice.

Her face, which had previously been looking down,

Emoto Sonoki-san slowly raised it.

"Ugh..... Uh, uugh, uuuuuughh."

"....."

She'd immediately started crying.

Suddenly, her knees collapsed and she crouched.

"I, I thought you, wouldn't c-come..... I was so, so worried..... b-but, thinking that you may come soon, I couldn't go home, i-it was lonely, and desolate, I thought I might die li-like that, alone, I-I asked myself why you wouldn't come, c-c..... cruel, so cruel, making me wait this much....."

"Eh..... Ah, err, but it's still ten minutes bef—"

"I came at two..... t-to not be late, thinking it would be bad to make you wait, ev-even then, even though I did all that, y-you made me wait one hour, without even a word of apology..... c-cruel, s-so you think making someone like me wait is normal, n-no matter what I feel, you don't care. W-what feelings did you t-think I've been waiting with, how do you think I've spent this hour, without considering that one bit, ugh, uuuugh, ugh, uuugh."

"....."

Her personality was more troublesome than I'd thought.

I had the faint hope that perhaps Emoto-san's character only seemed strange to us because we were in the special environment that was Sumiyuri Academy, but she destroyed that optimism.

"T-to come here, s-so that I could come here, how much courage do you think I mustered?"

"Aah..... Well, that may be true."

".....Ah. T-that, is that Mister Donuts?" Emoto-san, who had been rubbing her head while crying, suddenly raised her head. "What you are holding, that bag."

"Eh? Aah, yes."

".....Do you have French cruller?"

"They are all French crullers."

"How many?"

"Ten."

"....."

Emoto-san stood up and extended a hand towards me. Judging that she probably wasn't asking for a handshake, I gave her the bag of Mister Donuts.

Emoto-san confirmed the insides.

Then, gyaah, she hugged it.

"Ehe, happiness."

"....."

It was bad....

It was really bad.....

I may have really liked her a lot.....

She hit all the right points.

"The only things that God blessed this world with are integers and French crullers."

"Yeah....."

I didn't hate them, but I'd never thought that much of them.....

Ummm.

"Ehehe..... mmh. There's nothing to drink."

"Ah..... Sorry. I was careless. Should I go buy something nearby?"

"No need. It's fine. I would rather eat faster."

"Is that so. Then, let's go to a bench."

"Yes."

By the immense power of French crullers, the conversation with Emoto-san progressed miraculously. Well, it's not really related, but French crullers are definitely the way to go for donuts.

We sat on the bench nearest to the Kenreimon.

"Munch munch."

Emoto-san took a French cruller in each hand and filled her cheeks like a squirrel. It seemed she already had one in her mouth.

Uwaah..... She seemed really happy.

It was the first time I'd seen her that happy.

"I see. What, so you called me out to this place to feed me Mister Donuts."

"Of course not."

"Ah..... Sorry. I, immediately got cocky, I'm no good..... Really no good, there's probably nobody worse than me....."

Emoto-san was dejected again.

Umm.....

I should have bought more donuts.

"....."

October — the eleventh.

Tuesday.

The day after Monday.

I called out the *Doctor*, Emoto Sonoki.

Since both the insurance and the defense had been completed, next came the attack.

I called her out by phone yesterday, on the tenth of October after being discharged, talking to Kouta-san and to Kunagisa. Well, there had been **some unforeseen events** — but since they weren't anything inconvenient to me, there was no need for a change in plan.

Rather, they accelerated it.

I could not hesitate.

I couldn't afford to be lost.

"But you know..... *Ii-chan*."

"What is it?"

"How did you know my phone number?"

"....."

Don't ask so plainly.

It was a pain to make jokes.

"Ah, no..... Didn't you notice?"

It seemed that Emoto-san had a tendency to get uncomfortable when the other person wasn't speaking, so I rearranged her words carefully. It would've been a pain otherwise, so I decided to briefly explain the situation.

"That day..... you see."

"That day?"

"At Sumiyuri Academy, the day when you, the *Thirteen Stairs*, mister fox and I fought — in that second gymnasium, mister fox called you with his cellphone, didn't he?"

"Errr. Aah, yes. That reminds me, that may have happened."

"Well, I couldn't get mister fox's number since he was the one calling, but, from the movement of his fingers, I could get the number he was typing."

".....And you remembered that?"

"Yeah, basically."

"What an amazing memory....."

"Not really. This much is normal for me. In the end, it's just a problem of concentration and perception. From my perspective, it's natural. It's not like

pi; it's just an eleven digit number. Wouldn't people who can't remember it be rarer?"

In reality, I only remembered it faintly, so I'd tried the combination of eleven digits over and over and over, changing one or two digits every time, and after rearranging for dozens, hundreds of times, I connected to Emoto-san's number. However, since, even if I told her about all that work, Emoto-san would still praise me, I kept it a secret.

"So..... then, *Ii-chan*. The important part is from here, but..... Err, why did you call me here?"

"Well, from my perspective, it was slightly unexpected that you'd agree that easily. I'll confirm just in case, but — did you keep it a secret from mister fox?"

"Y-yes." Emoto-san nodded. "Rather, mister fox can't be bothered to be concerned about someone like me—"

"..... I guess so."

"?"

"No, just talking to myself."

I lightly swayed my head.

Then I indirectly surveyed my surroundings.

There was no surveillance that I could see.

Emoto-san really had come alone.

Also, I couldn't believe she was someone capable of lying about this. I'd trust her here.

"Then I'll cut to the chase, to my request."

"Y-yes..... I'm scared, but I will listen."

".....Emoto Sonoki-san."

I said.

Without hesitation.

"Please betray mister fox and work with me."

"....."

Emoto-san inadvertently dropped the French crullers she was holding. Since I'd expected that reaction, I managed to catch them before they reached the ground,

and stuffed them in her vacantly open mouth.

"I need your power."

".....Wha-what are you saying..... Do you understand? Ar-are you an idiot? I-I am — in the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"Naturally, I'm aware of that. And that you're one of the initial members too, of course. Not one of the new ones gathered in the last few months, I'm well aware that you've had a long relationship with mister fox, like Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan — painfully so. Therefore."

I held her right hand with both of mine hands.

"Therefore, I need your power."

".....U-uuuh."

Emoto-san swayed her hands and tried to run away from me. She seemed somewhat foolish because of the French crullers in her mouth, but her expression was desperate.

And quickly — the tears came.

"Wh-why, m-me, are you d-demanding this, of me? Wh-why, why, only me, this weird position....."

"Weird position....."

"O-only me, only me, why, this kind of thing..... Wh-why, why me..... more than me, aren't there others? T-there are a lot, of other *Steps*, other than me—"

"Because, that day — you grieved Izumu-kun's death too."

"....."

She seemed... very sad.

Emoto-san seemed very sad.

without any tears,

without any words,

she grieved Izumu-kun's death.

"—Then you are the same as me."

".....The same."

Right,

The same.

"Emoto-san. You see, I — to fight mister fox, I plan on breaking the *Thirteen Stairs* apart."

I continued, while watching Emoto-san's expression.

Though it was extremely hard to do so, because of the hood and her hair.

Anyway, I continued.

The Nonsense User, continued.

"Mister fox once called the *Thirteen Stairs* his *limbs* — that, since he had already been expelled from causality, he needed arms and legs that would affect the world and the Story, that it was necessary—"

"....."

"Then I'll *pluck* out those limbs first."

"Those... limbs."

"In that sense, it's not **just you — I want all *Thirteen Stairs* to betray him;** I plan on making them all betray him."

I said.

"Of course, that's just the ideal scenario. I can't deny that it's clumsy compared to the old Chinese strategies, but I can't think of a better plan. I sadly just don't have enough power to crush mister fox yet. I am really, really scared of him. But, last time — at Sumiyuri Academy — when I came in contact with the *Thirteen Stairs*, including you, and fought them, I realized. Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan, the Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic, those two — no, considering their personalities as exceptions, for each individual step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, **it's not like we can't do anything**."

"....."

"Individual attacks. For Kino-san's *poison*, as long as we know about it, there are countless ways to deal with it. In terms of pure violence, the Miotsukushi Sisters are certainly to be feared, but not as much as Izumu-kun. In the end, they are just a mishmash of riff-raffs. I think he had no intention of commanding them from the beginning. In the end, the ones we should watch out for in the *Thirteen Stairs*, excluding *her* who killed Izumu-kun, The Orange Seed, are the veteran members, the six who were present in October."

The first *six steps*.

Kajou Akira.

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

And — Emoto Sonoki and Utage Kudan.

It wasn't like I was obeying Nureginu-san's words, however, *not choosing your means to attain your goal*, what Nureginu-san of the *Yamiguchi* said certainly hit the mark.

To collapse the Thirteen Stairs, first, Utage Kudan, or —

Emoto Sonoki.

Aerial Weapon and Doctor.

These two were the key figures.

"Please, Emoto-san. Please — help me."

"Do..... do you think, I would, b-betray mister fox? Th-that, I could do, something t-this cowardly?"

"That's what I wish, but..... Honestly, I don't know. It may be an absurd request. But — no matter what..... I don't want to make someone who grieved Izumu-kun's death my enemy."

".....It's not really because it was Izumu-kun." Emoto-san said. "I-if someone dies, I would grief, no matter who they are."

"....."

That's—

'Everyone should just die, the world should just end' — those weren't the words of someone who would say that.

But.

I knew it.

It was something I knew.

That Emoto-san was this kind of person.

Otherwise,

she couldn't be a doctor with this kind of personality.

This person — Emoto Sonoki, simply.

Didn't want anyone to get hurt.

There were times when she went overboard,

but she never gave up.

That, just that — wasn't wrong.

Just that was not wrong.

"Frankly, from my perspective, you, the *Step* known as Emoto Sonoki, collapsing the *Thirteen Stair* that is Emoto Sonoki..... wouldn't be that hard. Since you're so troubled over this stupid request, since you answered to that stupid invitation, **collapsing you**..... shouldn't be that hard for me."

".....I-is that..... a th-threat? Th-threats, do not wo—"

"Don't misunderstand— though I said it wouldn't be hard, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to do it. I can't hate you, and I can't think of you as an enemy. Emoto-san, you are — I'm sure, not someone with a very kind personality. I think your personality is too weak to be kind. But, at the very least, you're exceptional."

"....."

Though not kind — exceptional[1].

"You're someone that gets hurt pretty easily — but therefore, you've probably never hurt anyone."

"Th-that's, I am, simply a doctor."

"**Therefore**."

"I-I am, I am, even if I cure the wounds of the body, even if I can cure the wounds of the mind — I can't cure true wounds, I am, not useful, to anyone—"

"I'm asking you to be useful to me."

I looked into her eyes.

Looking into people's eyes — to be honest, I didn't like it.

Because it felt like I was being seen through.

It was probably the same for Emoto-san.

Earlier, she'd averted her eyes.

But,

I looked into them.

"If your reason for being next to mister fox is that there are a lot of injured people, **it's the same if you're next to me.** The people hurt by my side — I want you to heal them. I want to transfer to you the rights to cure my wounds."

"……..B-but."

"Please become my ally, Emoto-san."

"But — I'm..." While swaying her head, tears were slowly spilling from her eyes. "Even you if say that, I don't know, what to do—"

"……."

"D-don't say it like that……. don't, ask me questions. D-don't ask for my opinion. F-force—"

Emoto-san looked at me, as if clinging to me.

Her pupils, covered with tears, were looking at me.

Looking at me.

"Force... me. Please force me. If you force me — I will obey. Y-you just need to threaten me. Frankly, you just need to threaten me. Threaten me properly, don't stop halfway through. Forcefully make me become your ally. Strongly, force me so that I can't go against you. **Like mister fox**. Like mister fox, that me obeying you is natural — say it like that. If you do that, I—"

---

[1] TL : kind and excelling are just two different readings of the same kanji

".....I don't know whether mister fox forced you or not, but your current position is something that the old you chose. I have no intention of snatching away that from you."

Neither do I intend—

To imitate mister fox.

I didn't have an absolute feeling like Saitou Takashi or Aikawa Jun.

I didn't have anything like that.

All I could do was just bow my head.

If you asked me what I was doing — I would answer like this.

This is my Original.

"You should choose. **I can't bear your responsibility**. I'm already full of my own. Just like I did, you should give me your conditions. I don't need limbs like mister fox — I'm fine with the ones on my body, thin as they are. What I earnestly want right now is friends to fight alongside me."

"Friends....."

"Emoto-san. Would you — become my friend?"

"....."

Emoto-san went silent.

I too, stayed silent.

I didn't have anything more to say.

Any more and it would be coercion.

That would just be menacing for her.

Despite myself, as usual, I didn't think it was a smart solution.

Nor did I know if this was correct.

Clumsy and awkward.

I thought I was requesting something absurd of Emoto-san.

But.

Even then, I—

For me, who couldn't become the Strongest,

more than the Worst, I wanted to become the Weakest.

".....French crullers."

"Eh.....?"

"French crullers, one hundred."

"....."

"Then — I will help you."

Emoto-san said.

She held my hand back.

And properly looked at my eyes.
"I will betray mister fox — and become your friend."
".....Is that fine?"
"Yes. I mean, I, to be honest—"
Emoto-san.
Probably for the first time in her life, said what she really thought.

"—I don't really want the world to end."

2

First, I told Emoto-san all the information that I had. Having Emoto-san accurately understand the situation was the first objective, and showing my trust towards Emoto-san the second.

Also, there was one more, a third objective — I wanted to confirm how much of our information had been leaked to mister fox. Of course, it wasn't clear how much of mister fox's information was passed on to Emoto-san, but to know whether everything was leaked, or whether it was a blind spot for him — that was necessary. I'd explained it all in detail, so, by the end of my summary, it was already over five in the afternoon.

I'd also talked about the phone call from Nureginu-san, and at the end,

I talked about Magokoro.

Omokage Magokoro, The Orange Seed, now

was at my apartment.

Without a doubt.

"Hmm....."

Emoto-san, despite her personality, seemed like she was quick on the uptake, so she understood everything on her first listen. She nodded quietly.

"I see..... right, of course it is — thinking about it, it is obvious, yes, I see.... That's why she fled..... that girl."

"I still haven't heard the details from her — she seemed tired."

"Tired, no wonder. That's, yeah..." Emoto-san said meaningfully. "..... You know, *Ii-chan*."

"Ah..... if possible, could you stop that? That way of calling me... to be honest, I don't really like it."

"But—"

"Originally, my little sister called me that, and Kunagisa imitated it — Magokoro just imitated it too. Well..... it would be more correct to say I let them imitate it, though."

"Hmm. Then, what should I call you?"

"However you like — errr, then....."

Ikkun.

Inoji.
Ii-nii.
Ii-no.
Inosuke.
I~i~.
Ikki.
.....Somehow, I didn't like any of them.
Thinking about it, they were all horrible nicknames.....
".....Ikkun, please."
"Mm. Understood. Then..... Ikkun."
"Yeah."
"Ikkun."
".....Yeah."
"Ikkun."
".....Yeah?"
"E-ehehe. A nickname, it's my first time using one."
"....."
Friends and acquaintances..... It seemed like she didn't have any.
Though she was called by one, she 'd never used one.
It unconsciously made my heart hurt.
"You know, Mister fox is in big trouble. I said it earlier, but..... Umm, Magokoro-chan ran away."
"....."
"So she was at your place....."
"Well, though it only happened yesterday, I guess mister fox already suspects it..... But, for that Omokage Magokoro — even if it's mister fox, there's probably nothing he can do."
Speaking of unexpected things,
for me, it wasn't inconvenient.
Rather, very convenient.
Just because of that, I'd accept it.
"Mister fox is....." Emoto-san said. "His hands are full with just repairing the damages caused by Magokoro-chan. I don't really want to say it, but — mister fox was a bit too off in his estimation. From my viewpoint as a doctor."
"About Magokoro?"
"Yes."
Emoto-san said.

"That girl — she is absurd, after all."

"Yes..... even Aikawa Jun was beaten in one blow. But, in his own way, didn't mister fox prepare a counterplan?"

He said that.

That he wouldn't make the same mistake as ten years ago.

For that, there was the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Migishita Rurero.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Kino Raichi.

Those three.

Their roles were restraining Omokage Magokoro.

".....I, knew it. I properly, warned, mister fox. **That, for that girl, just that — it's really not enough**."

".....What did mister fox say?"

"Nothing, really. Just, **I see**."

"Then..... more than him being off, it might be the situation he expected. Making the best counterplan possible, doing his best — the rest goes as it will."

Even then.

In that case, it wasn't the same.

Even if it was inevitable that it happened like that, in that case, no matter what, no matter how it went, it was not the same.

For mister fox — this was a bet.

A gamble.

Right, said Emoto-san.

"Th-that's why..... Err, um..... I think that, mister fox — he lost his gamble. If we see it like that, right now, he is fully making up for it. Yes, this is not the time to lay a hand on you. In reality, err, he wanted to begin meddling around the halfpoint of October, but it doesn't seem like that will be the case, anymore."

"....."

"The plans, he must — change them all."

"Magokoro is, for mister fox, for his *plans*.... for the confrontation with me, or rather, for *the end of the world* — an essential existence, an essential component."

My connection.

And she probably had more meaning than that.

".....Although we're not in a situation where we can say a lot about that. No matter what mister fox says, our own essential existence, Aikawa-san, is in his hands right now."

"Yes..... Right."

"So the trump cards got mixed up..... it's like playing Old Maid. I can't do it. There are too many jokers."

"....."

"By the way — what about Aikawa-san?"

"I healed her." Emoto-san said. "It was hard, or rather..... the wounds themselves weren't that big of a deal..... it was a wound on her head, but yeah, she really has a tough head, that person."

"Mister fox talked about one of her eyes being crushed or something like that."

"No, that wasn't the case."

"....."

That bluffing bastard.

"Then — is she fine?"

"Yes. But, I don't know where she is. Because, after that, mister fox took her somewhere else. I guess only Konomi-chan knows the place."

"I see....."

Really..... What was it for?

I didn't get it.

What was he trying to do to Aikawa-san.

"Well..... Even just knowing that she's fine is good. As long as she's alive, we'll meet again sometime."

"How optimistic."

"I'm forcing myself. With these words." I shrugged. "Returning to the main point — about Magokoro escaping your surveillance, your management; exactly how much damage was done?"

Enough damage for the fox-masked man to have his hands full.

I wondered exactly how much that was.

Emoto-san said.

"Kino-kun died."

"....."

"Magokoro-chan's handling was, errr, as you already know, Kino-kun, Rurero-san, and Tokinomiya-san's job. But Kino-kun was killed and

Rurero-san was severely injured. The only one unscathed is Tokinomiya-san, who was absent by chance."

Kino Raichi...

Did he die?

It was strangely... disappointing.

Not really sad.

It wasn't like it was sad.

Kino-san was just an enemy.

He got Miiko-san involved.

Just an enemy.

No fondness.

No hatred.

But — somehow it was still painful.

There was just an emptiness in my chest.

Like mud, it piled up in my chest.

"From that story..... It seems that **Magokoro aimed to move when Tokinomiya Jikoku was absent**."

"Yes..... the one who had the most dominating power over Magokoro-chan was Tokinomiya-san, after all. .....But, even then, until now..... There should have been plenty of times without him around."

".....Probably, but... it's most likely because, that day, at the academy, in that gymnasium, Magokoro saw me."

She certainly... saw me.

She recognized me.

She said *Ii-chan*.

"That's probably why — why she ran away from you."

Right. Oddly enough, it was as mister fox had said.

Rurero-san — was a bit late.

I had no way of knowing what kind of orders he gave to Rurero-san, but if she had reached that gymnasium even one second earlier, if she had sealed Magokoro's actions...

Magokoro wouldn't have been able to witness me.

It would have ended at me seeing Magokoro.

That was probably...

What the fox-masked man's plan had been.

That person, despite what he'd said, had no intention of really letting me meet Magokoro — I was sure, none at all.

That was just an introduction.

"Rurero-san..... It seems she was already injured, but — is she fine?"

"Ummm....."

Emoto-san looked down with her arms crossed.

It didn't seem she was fine.

"But, that person gets injured all the time, so that much should be fine. She probably won't go completely back to normal, but Rurero-san wouldn't mind that much."

"Someone who gets injured all the time, is it..... I feel some affinity."

"That person, I like her."

"Is that so....."

Was it because she got injured a lot?

Not a reason for being liked that I could welcome.

"How much did you hear from Magokoro-chan?"

"Not much..... As I said earlier, she was so tired that we've barely even greeted each other."

"Ah..... You know, Ikkun."

Emoto-san said.

"Kino-kun, Rurero-san, and Tokinomiya-san — each of them, with their powers, have been tampering with Magokoro-chan. Though I think you've guess as much—"

"Yeah. I got the gist."

"Yes. First, Kino-kun sealed Magokoro-chan's stamina, Rurero-san sealed her body, and Tokinomiya-san, her consciousness — each one of them was controlling her."

"....."

Stamina.

Body.

Consciousness.

"Magokoro-chan was in a situation where she couldn't exert even half of her original power. Even then, Tokinomiya-san distancing himself — was enough."

"..... At least..... I think there are other causes. That Nureginu-san left the *Thirteen Stairs*. That the Miotsukushi Sisters started acting on their own, so even if they haven't left *Thirteen Stairs*, they're no longer acting under mister fox's orders. Those are pretty important."

".....What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you understand? That means that, in the *Thirteen Stairs*, there are no longer any combatants. Magokoro's rampage — it could no longer be stopped by anyone."

"Ah..... right."

Emoto-san nodded as she understood.

"Exactly. Nureginu-san, Misora-chan or Takami-chan, as long as one of them was there, even if they couldn't subdue her, escaping would have probably been impossible."

"For mister fox, this is probably the worst case scenario. Bad luck on the level as sewing the eye of a needle a hundred times in a row. I have pretty bad luck myself, but — mister fox's everyday doings must be pretty bad."

I hate October — he said.

I see, I understand.

October was surely, for mister fox,

the demon's gate.

Though that would be a manner of speaking touching on fate.

"Err..... Even if she was treated as a cadet, she was still one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, so now that Kino-san and Rurero-san have retired....."

"Ah, no. Rurero-san will probably come back quickly. It's not to the point of retiring or being beyond recovery. It is a terrible injury..... but she is very strong willed."

"Is that so. Then, that means Magokoro and Kino-san left the *Thirteen Stairs*—"

I counted on my fingers.

Of course, subtracting Emoto Sonoki as well,

among the *Thirteen Stairs*, seven or so left.

.....Half — huh.

Even then,

seven was definitely not a small number.

"Those remaining are — Ichirizuka Konomi, Utage Kudan, Furuyari Zukin, Tokinomiya Jikoku, Migishita Rurero, as well as Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, right? Now, what should we do?"

"Th-this kind of thing, I don't know if it is okay for me to say it, but — now is our chance. Because of Magokoro-chan, mister fox is busy, so it's more like our only chance. You could even say there's no better chance than now."

"I understand. However, although you've just joined my side, for the seven left..... it probably won't be this easy, from here on..... It'll be more difficult."

"....."

"Even for you, with whom I'd previously met and exchanged words, I couldn't be certain. Much less for them — I honestly don't know anything about the seven left."

The Miotsukushi Sisters hated me.

Though I'd met Rurero-san,

the other four were completely unknown to me.

"It might be especially hard dealing with Konomi-chan. She idolizes mister fox to an extreme degree. I'm sure she will be the most difficult opponent. If it's for mister fox's sake, even dying wouldn't bother her."

"Even so, for now, his *limbs*, the *Thirteen Stairs* — I want to seal them. Also, if possible..."

"If possible?"

"No, if possible..... it's a vague plan, but — even if the negotiations with you went badly, I thought I'd make **direct contact** with Kino-san, Rurero-san, and Tokinomiya Jikoku. At the very least, it can't be settled without meeting those three. Since I figured they were the ones who put those constraints on Magokoro, even if they wouldn't betray mister fox, they could at least free her from those."

".....You really care for your friend."

"Wrong. That's totally wrong. But, if she was being *restrained* by the *Thirteen Stairs* against her will... I wanted to free her from that spell."

I mean, if it went like that,

it wouldn't have been different from before.

From when she was the Magokoro I knew.

If there was one difference between now and then,

that could have been it.

"Well, in the end, without me having to do anything, she managed to escape on her own."

".....Even if she ran away, it's not like that spell was lifted — it's not like the chains or the shackles were removed. I'll say it just in case..... Kino-kun's poison will continue to affect her regardless of his death, and Rurero-san's *puppeteer* trick and Tokinomiya's *thought manipulation* basically can't be removed — just as you guessed..... That day, at the academy, Rurero-san and

Tokinomiya-san were there just in case they needed to restrain Magokoro, but **it's not something that can't be done if they aren't nearby**. They can tighten up the chains if they're nearby, **but even if they're far away, the chains remain**. That's why, if you really want to remove the constraints, you do need to approach Rurero-san and Tokinomiya-san."

"Hmm....."

"Rurero-san and Tokinomiya-san's chains are outside of my expertise, so I don't know..... but for Kino-kun's *poison*, I..... um, err, you know, I think I could do something."

".....I guess. Can I count on you?"

"I don't mind..... but, Ikkun." Emoto-san said, worried. "That spell — even if you can remove it, are you confident you could restrain Magokoro-chan?"

"Restrain....."

"Even mister fox, it's not like he put up those chains because he wanted to..... You understand that he isn't that kind of person, right? He is not one to make others do as he wants by force..... That girl's power is too immense — too non-standard, so he had no choice."

".....In the first place, where did mister fox get Magokoro from? In my mind, she'd already died long ago — or, she should have. If I remember correctly, mister fox said he had some old acquaintances at the ER3 System or something."

"Yes. Mister fox's mentor, and an old relative, belonged to the ER3 System..... he said it was that kind of contact, but I honestly don't really know. He only said that Magokoro was a *creation* of the branch mister fox built, MS-2..... Perhaps Kino-san, Rurero-san or Tokinomiya-san heard more details, but there is a gag order on Magokoro-chan among the *Thirteen Stairs*. So they absolutely cannot talk about it."

"Yeah — I guess that's to be expected."

It seemed the fox-masked man wanted to hide Magokoro from me, so it was natural that there would be a gag order. If Kino-san had carelessly slipped his tongue, the fox-masked man's plan would have been ruined.

Well,

even if I'd known, could I have really done anything?

At that point.

"Ah, me too, at the academy, when I talked to you, I knew about Magokoro, but I couldn't say anything..... sorry."

"It's fine, that was to be expected. It's not something to brood over. However, that means..... I guess if I don't hear it directly from Magokoro, I won't get anywhere. Since she's directly involved, she should know more."

"Right."

"This is just out of curiosity, but — Magokoro. She, in front of you all — what kind of personality did she have?"

".....Since those three and mister fox were firmly guarding her, I didn't have many chances to talk, but....." Emoto-san chose her words for a bit. ".....She was a good girl."

"....."

"She was a good girl, I think."

".....Is that so."

"I don't think — I can dislike her."

"Right."

I nodded.

"The Magokoro I know is that kind of person. Even though she's detestable and odious, for some reason, you just can't hate her....."

".....I see."

"However... she killed Izumu-kun."

Without any mercy, she killed him.

No, not just Izumu-kun.

Even Moeta-kun, Houko-chan, and Aikawa-san — it wouldn't have been weird if they died on the spot. Those three survived simply because they had good luck.

"She didn't use to have these kinds of frightening combat abilities — she wasn't someone who could do things like that, nor was she someone who would."

"....."

"At first, I thought that mister fox **must have done something**, but that doesn't seem to be the case. You said it wasn't something he liked doing. Then, the ones who did it—"

"Yes."

Emoto-san said.

"The ER3 System's... MS-2."

".....Awful."

"S-sorry!"

"No, not you....." I thought we'd finally be able to have a normal conversation, but I guess I was too naive. "About the ER3 System... When I was a student of the Program, I'd thought they were a bunch of nasty people..... but to turn Magokoro into **a monster like this**, that's absurd."

".....So you are mad, Ikkun."

Should I make contact with Kokoromi-sensei?

Miyoshi Kokoromi.

She occupied an important position in MS-2's *Orange Seed* development project. At a relatively early stage of the plan, she retired from the ER3 System and was removed as a Project Member — but, in the first place, Magokoro's naming origin was the name Kokoromi.

Maybe she knew something.

I didn't know what Sensei was currently doing..... I'd thought she returned to the ER3 System, but.....

She was someone I really wanted not to see again.....

The second most, after Maki-san.

Now that Maki-san was deceased, she was in first place, huh.

".....From now on, what should I do? Should I immediately release Magokoro-chan from Kino-kun's *poison*?"

"No..... hearing that just now, I guess it's not something to take lightly. I want to ascertain the situation a bit more. I need to hear Magokoro's side of the story..... So, I want to entrust another job to Emoto-san."

"What is it..... I-if it's something I can do."

"Then, Emoto-san. Please help me meet the other *Thirteen Stairs*. Please introduce me to them. If possible — one by one."

"Pluck... the limbs."

"Yes. From here on, it'll be hard, but — I still want a peaceful resolution with everyone from the *Thirteen Stairs*. Since betrayal is something I hate doing and being done to me, I can't force them — but, even the Miotsukushi Sisters aiming for me, and even Ichirizuka Konomi who is wholeheartedly devoted to mister fox — without exception, I want to conclude the conflict with them peacefully. And—"

If possible, with mister fox too.

I didn't say that much.

That much, even I couldn't say.

"But..... I a-am not t-that close to the recent members of *Thirteen Stairs*..... All of them might be impossible....."

"Naturally, as much as you can is enough."

".....Understood."

Emoto-san stood up from the bench.

Took off the hood of her raincoat.

"Then, first, let me see..... since there is the matter with Magokoro-chan, yeah. I will first have you meet Rurero-san."

Rurero-san.

Migishita Rurero.

"Can you do it? Rurero-san is one of the few who joined recently, isn't she?"

"The only old members left are Kudan-san and Konomi-chan, but Konomi-chan would be too much to begin with, and I don't know where Kudan-san currently is. But I just treated Rurero-san's injuries, so it's fine. For now, she shouldn't be able to use her *Puppeteer* powers, so she's easy to meet. The faster the better."

"Is Rurero-san hospitalized?"

"Rurero-san isn't someone who can get hospitalized. So, with mister fox's connections, at a certain place — no, I shouldn't talk about it yet. Tomorrow..... do you have time?"

"I do."

"But you are a university student, aren't you?"

"I'll be absent for a while."

".....You should go to school seriously."

For some reason, I was told something ordinary.

She really liked joking.

"Then..... Tomorrow, at nine, c-can we meet here again again? Somehow, I'll arrange things to let you meet Rurero-san. It would be bad if mister fox got in the way."

".....True."

"It should take some more time to deal with Magokoro-chan running away, so I don't think we have to be that careful."

"Then, I'm counting on you."

"Yes. Leave it..... to me."

I, too, stood up from the bench.

Tomorrow..... huh.

Then — until tomorrow,
I should do what I needed to do.
Magokoro.
Omokage... Magokoro.
I..... to you.

I need to apologize to you.

3

I returned to the apartment.
Hikari-san and Magokoro were there.
Both of them in maid clothes.
"....."
What kind of paradise was this?
I was completely dumbfounded.
"There weren't many outfits that fit Magokoro-san..... That being said, it would have been bad to leave her in underwear and leggings, but master's clothes are too big, while her stature is about the same as mine."
".....Then lend her your normal clothes."
"Ara."
Hikari-san giggled.
"That was also a solution."
"....."
Why are you finding this funny?
Don't you understand the current situation?
Behaving this carefreely...
.....And.
Then,

"Ii-chan!"

There, Magokoro —
Magokoro wedged herself between me and Hikari-san.
"How is it!? Do these clothes fit ore-sama!?"
".....They fit you."
Though I wondered how that benefitted her.
For starters, I answered thusly.
"Is that so! ore-sama is happy!"
And,
Magokoro looked as if she was truly happy.

She hugged herself.

"Heheheh! Ii-chan, I like you!"

".....Yeah. I like you too, Magokoro." I said. "Therefore, instead of roaming around this narrow room in those bulky clothes, you should sit down."

"Mmh. If I sit, it will get wrinkled."

"You should sit skillfully, bending your knees like Hikari-san."

"Got it. ore-sama will give it a shot."

Saying that, Magokoro,

skillfully handled her skirt and sat down flawlessly.

....She hadn't changed.

Being able to do anything immediately...

She really hadn't changed.

As if she hadn't changed at all.

There was nothing she couldn't do — The Orange Seed.

"Now."

I sat down as well and paused for a second.

"Yesterday you were tired, so you ended up mostly sleeping and we couldn't really talk..... but, now — it's been a long time, Magokoro."

"Yeah. It has."

"Errr..... Hikari-san. Did you introduce yourselves to each other?"

"Yes. Here is Omokage Magokoro."

"I know."

"Here is Chiga Hikari."

"I know."

They were really pumped up.

Why were they such kindred spirits?

What happened while I wasn't home?

In regards to Magokoro, from how she was yesterday and last time, I'd been a bit worried, but she seemed to be pretty lively.

Vivid and radiant.

Like...

Like during our ER3 days.

As if we'd returned to those days.

As if we'd gone back to that time.

Yesterday, after being discharged, meeting Kouta-san and Kunagisa and returning to the apartment — inside my room, Magokoro was there.

To be precise, she was sleeping.

Soundly sleeping.

Though she woke up a few times, she was unable to get a good grasp of things, and we were ultimately unable to have a proper talk. But today, her condition became somewhat better. That's why, before going out to meet Emoto-san at the Kyoto Imperial Garden, we'd been able to do some idle chatting — but, having Magokoro in front of me like this, you could say it was the first time.

"Ore-sama slept well."

Magokoro said as she stretched.

I didn't want her doing such ungraceful actions in maid clothes, so I thought about warning her, but I decided to hold back.

"I guess it has been a long time since ore-sama has been this refreshed. Because I was always restrained."

"It seems that you weren't treated very well at mister fox's place, Magokoro."

"That's just the usual, so I don't mind. And it's thanks to that that I was able to meet Ii-chan." Magokoro said with a carefree smile. "In the first place, I followed that fox jerk with that condition."

"That condition?"

"That he would help me meet Ii-chan."

"....."

.....I see.

Therefore — huh.

So, as I thought, at that gymnasium, Rurero-san **was a little late**.

"So — you escaped, right?"

Killing Kino-san.

Severely injuring Rurero-san.

She escaped — from mister fox's surveillance.

She ran away.

"Yeah. Ore-sama always kicked those guys around, but since I wanted to be peaceful until I met Ii-chan, I restrained myself."

".....I think I saw you once in the underground parking lot of a building in Shirosaki, though."

"Mm? .....That, I don't know."

Magokoro pouted her lips curiously.

"Ore-sama may have been asleep at that time."

".....I see."

She was sleeping, huh.

I couldn't tell since she was wearing a mask, but that may have been true. Well, I couldn't imagine mister fox would screw up that badly.

"Heheh. I'm happy. Even in my wildest dreams, I didn't think I could meet Ii-chan again."

"Me too... I didn't think so."

But,

this was reality.

The Magokoro here existed in reality.

I could see her, hear her, and touch her.

If I thought about touching her, I could.

It was reality.

"Magokoro, you..... Since then, what happened? I thought you died."

"I don't think much happened. **Forever, that continuation continued.** The experiments trying to complete me as The Orange Seed."

".....Then, did they..... complete it?"

That frightening test.

That deed which could even frighten gods.

An act outside of humans' domain.

That research, which could be described as blasphemy to the gods.

That experiment, which could be described as a contract with the Devil.

Magokoro,

"Ore-sama doesn't know."

She said.

"....."

"Don't make such a blatantly disappointed face. It's not something that ore-sama can decide. I don't know what I don't know, and I don't understand what I don't understand. Whether I am complete or incomplete, before I could find out — that fox jerk kidnapped me."

"Kidnapped?"

"Before I knew it, I was alone with him."

"....."

That was probably Ichirizuka Konomi's doing.

That woman's technique.

Space Creator.

I see..... He and Emoto-san said he'd used one of his connections, but, in the end, the fox-masked man just stole *The Orange Seed*, Omokage Magokoro, from where she formerly belonged, the ER3 System. That seems to be the truth.

So you're going this far, Saitou Takashi?

You're going this far...

Just to make me your enemy?

.....Well, for the fox-masked man, MS-2 is something that he'd originally created, so it wasn't that strange for him to feel a sense of ownership over Magokoro.

However, it was still weird.

Ignoring Magokoro.

"Magokoro..... do you remember that day?"

"Which day?"

".....The day we met at that academy."

"Ore-sama remembers meeting you, but apart from that, not much. Mmm. Somehow, I feel like I went on a rampage, but that is all."

"I see. Just that much, huh."

Her memory... vanished.

She wasn't playing dumb, was she?

In this situation.

Rather, there were other causes that I could think of.

"Yeah, errr — it was a lot of trouble. For you, too. Anyway, just rest up for a bit. You must not have had time to rest properly until now."

"Well, yes. It was pretty hard for ore-sama, being confined is such a gloomy place. But, that's just as usual, so I am fine."

"....."

'As usual'.

'Fine'.

"Ore-sama is used to it."

"I see....."

'Used to it'.

Can't get used.

The Orange Seed.

"So — Magokoro, what are you going to do from here on out?"

"Mm?"

"After running away from mister fox and meeting me, from here on out, what are you going to do? If there's anything you want to do, I'll help you."

"I have no..... objective. Not particularly."

Magokoro said in a vacant way.

It seemed she didn't understand what I said.

"So you don't."

"There are things I want done to me and things I want not done to me, but I don't have any things I want to do or not do. I want Ii-chan to be kind to me, and I don't want any more experiments done to me, but..... apart from that, not much. Ore-sama has been like that from way back."

".....How about revenge?"

"Revenge?"

"For having restrained you until now — the ER3 System and mister fox....."

Probably,

the thing the fox-masked man was most on guard about was that.

He should have been on guard.

Dealing with Magokoro running away didn't just mean recouping the damages or treating Rurero-san's big injury — the counterplan against Magokoro would have been the main part. Being wary of one's opponent also implies hiding that wariness from them.

And he was forcibly pushing that on us.

And if he was preparing something, even more so.

It must have been quite unplanned.

"Aah, no."

But, Magokoro.

Lightly swayed her hand in front of her face.

"That kind of thing is a pain, so I'll pass."

"....."

"Because I was able to meet I-chan, ore-sama will forgive everything."

Right,

It was more unplanned than unplanned.

Neither the fox-masked man, nor the ER3 System.

None of them could change her.

She was no one's enemy.

Unchallenged and undefeated — the last one standing.

Humanity's Last, Omokage Magokoro.

"—I see."

.....I was relieved.

I didn't know what I would've done if she'd been planning revenge.

That wouldn't have been the Magokoro I knew.

But now it was all clear.

She was..... none other than Omokage Magokoro.

I felt a load off my chest.

"Then — rest well, Magokoro. There's no one here who would treat you like a toy for human experiments. You're not a tool or a guinea pig. You are — free."

"Free?"

"It means: do whatever you want."

".....Hehe."

Magokoro was bashful.

Like before, she was bashful.

"I am happy."

".....Yes. Me too — I'm happy."

"I see. So Ii-chan is happy too. Then I am twice as happy."

".....Sorry."

I softly bowed my head towards Magokoro.

And apologized.

"Sorry."

".....For what?"

Magokoro raised her thick eyebrows and made a puzzled face.

"..... I... because I thought you'd died..... Until now, I couldn't do anything for you. Sorry."

"What? That's no big deal. Nothing to apologize for. Wouldn't it have been impossible for you to find out? Everyone, the bunch from the ER3 System and that fox jerk, they all wanted to keep it a secret from Ii-chan."

".....But."

It wasn't just that.

At that time.

Even though you'd trusted me...

I couldn't answer to that

and betrayed you.

Even though I didn't like doing it or it being done to me.

"You are... strong, Magokoro."

"Um?"

"You're strong. You—"

With such a childish stature.

Thin arms and stick-like legs.

Even though she was in so much trouble.

Even though she received so much pain that I couldn't imagine it even if I tried.

That 'I forgive'.

That 'I'm fine'.

Was really — strong.

Really, **you guys** were strong.

.....Thinking back, Aikawa-san too — she was the same.

That person was certainly, as Hikari-san once said, constantly angry and used to everything — but precisely because she didn't forgive anything, in the end, she was able to forgive everything.

Therefore — the strongest.

So that was how it was?

"Not really. The strongest one is surely Ii-chan." Magokoro said. "I mean, ore-sama likes Ii-chan."

"....."

"People liked by others are strong."

"They are strong, which makes them liked?"

"No no. Because they are liked, they are strong." Magokoro said joyfully. "Look, errr, if someone comes to like you, you think you have to do your best, don't you? Your chest is filled with gratitude and, for the sake of that person, you feel like doing something, don't you? See, Hikari-san thinks so too, right?"

"Eh? Ah, yes. Exactly."

Hikari-san, who'd been left behind in the conversation, was surprised when Magokoro suddenly called her name.

"I also think that master is strong."

"....."

Even Hikari-san.....

Even though I said not to be kindred spirits.....

"I...."

Magokoro,

her face became slightly dejected.

"Because the only one who ever came to like me was Ii-chan — I am weak."

"....."

"So weak it's pathetic."

".....If you say I'm the only one that likes you, then I'll like you enough for everyone else."

Six billion would be enough,

that's what Izumu-kun would have said.

"Really?"

"Really."

"I'm glad."

—And.

Having said that, **thud**, Magokoro's jaw suddenly dropped. She was on the verge of falling over, but I was somehow able to catch her before that.

".....What happened?"

"Mm.....No, I'm sleepy."

".....? Hey hey, you've already slept for so long yesterday, haven't you?"

"Yes....."

Then, once again, her jaw dropped.

"Yes, but..... for some reason, again... I'm sleepy."

"You're sleepy, but—"

Right then.

When I was about to say more to Magokoro, Hikari-san, without raising her voice, quietly sealed my mouth with her hand.

"Then, Magokoro-san. How about you go rest again? This room is small, but..... Right, master, how about using the bed in Yukariki-san's room?"

".....Right. The bed in that room is big and comfortable to sleep on." Having received those words from Hikari-san, I said to Magokoro. "Hey Magokoro. I'll say it just in case, but it's the room my disciple formerly used, so don't make too much of a mess—"

I stopped my words.

Magokoro had...

Magokoro had fallen asleep while sitting upright.

Sleeping.

"....."

".....What does this mean, Hikari-san?"

"I don't know."

Hikari-san shook her head apologetically.

"Just, since yesterday, I thought her consciousness was quite faint. So I suspect a sleeping disease — or symptoms like that."

"Sleeping disease....."

I remembered — Rizumu-chan.

Rizumu-chan, who would frequently lose consciousness all of a sudden. That was her nature as a part of the *Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic*. Because of their overlapping personalities, it was inevitable.

However,

in this case,

there was no need to think about it.

".....Tokinomiya Jikoku..... I guess."

"*Tokinomiya*..... of the *Cursing Names*."

"Yes. The so-called Thought Manipulator — using techniques similar to hypnosis, it seems. And, that Tokinomiya Jikoku is controlling Magokoro's spirit."

".....Hypnosis, is it?"

"There are restraints on her mind. Seems that her collapsing in that gymnasium on that day was yet another rule, but....."

That was — Migishita Rurero.

The Puppeteer and the Thought Manipulator.

Even if she'd escaped from mister fox's place...

Well, I couldn't say that nothing changed.

But, even if the chains wouldn't get any tighter.

They were still there, huh.

Emoto-san had been right.

"She's a good girl."

Looking at Magokoro, Hikari-san said the same words as Emoto-san.

"Straightforward, not twisted in the least — though her speech is a bit revolting, that's charming in itself too — and..."

"Yeah..... She really is."

"I just can't believe it. That, due to this girl, Aikawa-san — no, not just Aikawa-san....."

"Yes. I was doubtful too — but if it wasn't of her own will, it's not like I can't understand. Chains can become reins, after all."

Thinking about it,

at that time, Magokoro had been practically **sleeping**.

Even while sleeping — being able to do that much.

In other words, that meant,

that it was already decided.

"Then, then..... Saying my personal opinion at a time like this may be overly idyllic of me, but..... To use such a cute girl as a tool..... to restrain her... It's just too cruel. That's what I think."

".....Exactly."

About what Emoto-san had said earlier, whether we should carelessly remove the chains restraining Magokoro, I still had my doubts.

That power.

Three *Killing Names* were nothing to her.

She'd overwhelmed Aikawa Jun.

That much power — that was not even half of it.

That much violence was short of half her true power.

Maybe restraining her was necessary.

Maybe the chains were indispensable.

The fox-masked man, too.

He wasn't just doing it because he wanted to.

But.

But, even knowing that.

"That girl — she's someone I instinctively want to do something for. Like Hime-chan, or Kunagisa."

".....Do you want... to save her?"

"It's my main defect. Unnecessarily meddling in."

"Fufu." Hikari-san faintly laughed. "Are you trying to make me say the same thing again?"

"No. Kunagisa said something similar yesterday too, so please spare me. .....Um, Hikari-san."

"What is it?"

"May I hold something heavier than chopsticks?"

Hikari-san was confused for an instant before catching on and smiling gently.

"Please."

Saying that, she smoothly opened the door of the room.

I,

firstly, took off Magokoro's clothes,

untied her orange braids,

then held her small body with both arms.
Holding her.
Then, passing by Hikari-san, I went to the hallway.
Light.
As if I was carrying nothing.
Light like a feather.
Light like a heart.
Hikari-san closed the door and followed me.
Overtaking me at the stairs' landing, one step ahead of me, she went towards Hime-chan's room on the first floor.
She opened the door and waited for me.
".....Huh? Was the door unlocked?"
"Yes. Ever since master left it open last time."
"So it's been open all this time....."
Outside of her job, this person was surprisingly sloppy.
Well, in the first place, the key went missing when Hime-chan died, and I couldn't open and close it myself unless I used the anti lock blade, so Hikari-san had no choice other than to leave it open.
Anyway.
Entering the room, I put Magokoro to sleep on top of the bed.
Putting the duvet over her, I quietly left.
"Good night."
Now, rest.
You have that right.
Ever since being born...
Without rest, without the chance to rest,
You, who's been continually used.
".....In reality, even while saying all that, in the bottom of my heart, until just earlier, I'd been thinking various things—"
Cunning things,
sly things,
filthy things,
dirty things.
I'd been thinking about a lot and a lot of things, but —
I gave up on all that.
I swore.
I, and only I, would not use you.

I would not use your existence.
As a trump card against the fox-masked man,
I'd refrain from using you.
I didn't know how the fox-masked man intended to use Aikawa-san, Overkill Red, as a trump card — but I would just protect The Orange Seed as a trump card.
Just watch from a safe place.
Like usual, be an observer.
Let's do this without any trump cards.
First,

I will set you free.

Truly free.
Real freedom.
"Hikari-san."
"What is it?"
"From here on, I think there'll be a lot of times when I'll be away from the apartment..... So please, continue to take care of her for a while."
".....As you say."
We both left the room.
Aah, I need to lock the door behind me.....
Or maybe even make a duplicate key.
With a lock like that, it'd be simple even without the original.
Returning to the first floor.
"Aah."
I stopped walking.
Right, just in case.
Or how should I put it, just to be sure.
While passing by it,
I knocked on the door of Nanananami's room.
No answer.
But she should've been here on Tuesday at this hour.
I knocked once again, and without waiting for an answer,
"I'm counting on you for next door."
I said.
There was still no answer.

But she'd surely heard me.
Then, it would be fine.

ACT 14 - UNSIGNED

FURUYARI ZUKIN
SWORDSMITH

0

Between regretting what I've done and regretting what I haven't, I choose to do and regret — then, between not regretting what you've done and not regretting what you haven't, which will you choose?

1

In the end, my meeting with the *Thirteen Stairs*' Puppeteer, Migishita Rurero-san would come to be on Saturday the fifteenth.

Since then, her condition had worsened.

Putting it simply, she had entered into critical condition.

"I'm sorry."

On the twelfth of October, one hour earlier than the appointed time of 9 in the morning, Emoto-san was already before the Imperial Garden's Kenreimon, wearing the same raincoat as yesterday. The first thing she did was apologize.

"Her wounds in and of themselves shouldn't put her life in danger..... but it seems her mind is confused. As time passed, she'd calmed down, but her fear has revived..... I think. I guess calling it backflash would make it easier to understand for normal people....."

"Is that so....."

"Because it was Rurero-san we were talking about, I thought she would eventually be fine if we left her alone, but now visitors are strictly forbidden. Even mister fox."

"....."

"I'm sorry. But I am a doctor."

Though it was still temperate, still reserved, that was the first time I'd seen Emoto-san show such a strong will.

Naturally, I had no objections. If it was something involving her health, I wouldn't force her. And in the first place, it wouldn't mean anything to me if I met her when she wasn't in a state to hold a conversation.

"From what I can judge..... it should be impossible for at least three more days. I think Rurero-san should calm down in three days. So..... um, the fifteenth. I can't be certain, I can't make an absolute promise, but for now, wait until the fifteenth. Please wait."

"Understood. I'll do as you say. .....But, Emoto-san, what's that bandage around your left wrist?"

"Eh? That?"

Emoto-san raised her left arm slightly.

"Aah..... Um, errr, you see. I couldn't bear the mental pressure of betraying someone, so I slashed my wrists a few times."

"....."

Thinking about it, I'd made Emoto-san into a trojan horse, a spy..... In a position where, even though she was working for me, she still hadn't officially left the *Thirteen Stairs*. Unless you were someone like Neo-san, it was natural to feel a huge amount of pressure.

"Su-suicide attempts....."

"Ah, don't get it wrong. Suicide and wrist slashing are different. This is just an immediate stress reliever."

Emoto-san said, with a shy smile.

That logic was frightening enough to make my hair stand.

"Wi-with wrist slashing, no more lashing."

"....."

On top of being stupid, I couldn't even laugh.

Rather, on a more fundamental level, could someone unable to lie like her really play the role of a trojan horse? Inside my heart, a dark cloud of doubt had started rising.

"I..... fine. It's fine. It is fine."

"No, but..... Even if you say so."

"I'm always suspicious, so even if I act suspiciously, no one will doubt me."

"I see....."

It fit her well.

In exchange for not lying, she was not believed even when telling the truth.....

And she was also aware of it.

It was somehow worse than I thought.....

"D..... don't worry. You shouldn't worry. Ikkun. It's not something Ikkun should be worried about. This is..... um, something I'm doing o-of my own will, so you don't have to pay any mind to it."

".....Right."

I... shouldn't interject.

The scope of when I could do that was already over.

That was something I'd decided from the start.

I wouldn't — force anyone.

Not Magokoro.

Not anyone, I would absolutely not force anyone.

"Then..... Um, Emoto-san. The fifteenth, at the same hour, here — is that fine with you? Since it'll be a Sunday, the Imperial Garden will be a little crowded, but there shouldn't be any problems in the early morning."

"Yes. Understood."

"By the way, Emoto-san — what kind of role do people currently have in the *Thirteen Stairs*? Do you know the roles of anyone aside from Rurero-san?"

"No..... Since she went into critical condition, I've been stuck to Rurero-san. I don't know the details of what the others are doing....."

Hearing a bit more about it, it seemed the fox-masked man was sending the *Thirteen Stairs* here and there individually and not gathering them in a single place.

Going around other places seemed to be literal. Since I didn't intend to see the fox-masked man yet, I didn't mind it.

"Is that so. Then, though I know it's a lot of pressure, please continue to hide among the *Thirteen Stairs*. I'd be thankful if you informed me when they make a concrete move."

"Yes. I will do that."

"The ones whose actions interest me the most are the ones hunting me, the Miotsukushi Sisters, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami..... But they still haven't even tried to appear before me. I'm also very curious about Utage Kudan and Furuyari Zukin."

"Yes. I guess." Agreed Emoto-san. "Then..... Sorry, I need to return to where Rurero-san is. I can't let her spend too much time alone."

".....Is it that bad?"

By Magokoro,

the wound she received from Omokage Magokoro.

Is it that severe?

"No..... But even if it's not the case, I would feel bad leaving a mentally weakened person alone. Someone has to hold their hand."

"....."

Though her personality was absurd.....

She was still a doctor. That's what I thought.

She was self-aware of that.

Really..... She hit every single right point.

How nasty.

"Then..... Can you tell me the place she's staying at, just in case? Since I don't know what might happen to you from here on, I want to at least have that information."

"....."

"It's fine, I won't go meet her uninvited. I promise I won't see Rurero-san without your authorization as a doctor."

".....It's a place you know very well."

Emoto-san said, after hesitating a bit.

"The research facility of the late university Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku — the place formerly known as the Saitou Clinic."

"Saitou..."

I was... lost for words.

It was — a place that was done already.

A place that no longer had any connections to the Story.

The place where Madoka Kuchiha.

Where Kigamine Yaku.

Where Niounomiya Izumu and Niounomiya Rizumu.

And where Yukariki Ichihime...

Died.

Where they were killed.

I see..... that place would have been very far from my range of actions and, from the fox-masked man's perspective, it would have been on the outside of destiny as well. For injured people to rest and heal — it might have been the best place imaginable.

And it was also originally a clinic.

Though it might have been simplistic, it was still a medical facility. At the very least, there would've been the minimum amount of equipment required to *study* Kuchiha-chan's body.

How should I say it; in a way, choosing that place as a resting spot was cowardly of him, however, it was a despicably good move. Even during the chaos of Magokoro's escape — as expected of Humanity's Worst, I guess.

Anyhow.

The meeting with Rurero-san got put off to the fifteenth. It seemed Emoto-san wouldn't be able to move until then either, so naturally, without being able to meet any other *Thirteen Stairs*,

I was given a three day extension.

Blank.

Honestly, I didn't know how to handle an extension in the midst of such a busy time.

Magokoro was asleep most of the time, so I couldn't ask her more.

Since then, Magokoro had really spent her time sleeping. She slept so deeply on Hime-chan's bed that I had to wonder if her eyes would start to rot.

It seemed that Kino-san's *poison* wasn't a hindrance to living an everyday life, and Rurero-san's wasn't much of a problem as long as it wasn't activated, but we needed to do something about Tokinomiya's *spell* quickly, I thought.

Cursing Names, huh.....

I had already learned a lot about **that world**'s behind the scenes from Moeta-kun, but because of Ichirizuka Konomi's *Space Creation*, he was cut off before he started to explain the *Cursing Names*.

The two *Cursing Names* among the *Thirteen Stairs* were Kino Raichi and Tokinomiya Jikoku. Magokoro had already — already killed Kino-san, so there was only one *Cursing Name* left, Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Other than bringing Rurero-san to me, I'd also intended to have Emoto-san help me meet the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*, but —

I couldn't sit around without doing or planning anything.

The mummy hunter himself becomes a mummy — that was also a possibility.

I needed to be careful about that.

Well, judging from the situation, it seemed like I wouldn't meet Tokinomiya Jikoku for a while, so I'd worry about that later.

That was why, for now, about Magokoro, as Emoto-san had said, we'd have to grasp the situation better — rather, we'd put releasing Magokoro's chains on hold until we consulted both Rurero-san and Tokinomiya Jikoku. It wasn't just because we needed to be cautious before releasing such an immense power, but since three different chains were linked, I thought they might have been literally linked together.

So, for the time being.

On the first day of the extension.

Me and Hikari-san,

once again went to Shinkyogoku.

An OPA near the four-way intersection along Kawahara street.

leaving Magokoro to Nanananami,

we went shopping together.

Of course, it wasn't as carefree as it sounded.

First — there was daily life.

We went to buy clothes for Magokoro.

We couldn't let her stay in maid clothes forever.

Just leggings would be even worse.

Also, a toothbrush, a towel, and what a person needed apart from clothes to live.

I'd initially thought Hikari-san would suffice alone for this task, but apparently, according to her 'I would not be able to understand Magokoro-san's tastes by myself, so it would help if you could accompany me.', so we went together.

"Hair—"

"Eh?"

"Her hair, it really stands out, doesn't it? Her pupils, too."

"Ah, yeah. That's right. Even if not as much as Kunagisa's blue, orange is a bit of an unusual hair color."

"Magokoro-san probably won't just continue to sleep forever, so when she wakes up, we can't possibly ask her to stay in her room all the time, could we? Also, she needs to take baths and such."

"Well, I guess."

"Then, wouldn't it be better to dye her hair?"

"Dye, huh....."

I crossed my arms.

Those braids.

That orange hair — beautifully reflecting the daylight.

Magokoro's favorite.

She said it was her favorite part of her body.

".....I think she'd hate that."

"Is that so..... For reference, what do you usually do with Tomo-san's hair and pupils?"

"She's not the type to worry about other people's eyes. Also, she doesn't go outside often in the first place."

"Aah..... right."

"When she absolutely had to, though that's when she was a kid, when it was really bad to stand out, she wore a hat and sunglasses."

"Hm."

"Aah, that reminds me. At first, the fox-masked man made Magokoro wear a mask and a baseball cap."

"I don't like the mask, but — let me see, a hat..... may work. Then let's buy a hat and sunglasses."

"Yeah."

Well, for the fox-masked man, it was probably obvious that Magokoro was at my place, but even then, we didn't need to expressly make her stand out. We needed to be at least that careful.

As expected of the skillful Hikari-san, aside from asking me for advice two or three times, without having me hold any bags, our shopping had concluded in just about three hours.

To not directly go home, we entrusted our recently bought articles to a coin locker and hung around Shinkyogoku.

Ummm.

Well, how should I say it.

Though it was a misunderstanding.

Though I understood I was mistaken.

It had been the first time in a long while —

a peaceful and relaxed time.

".....How peaceful."

Hikari-san said it too.

While looking at all the people walking on the streets.

"It's hard to imagine that there is someone saying absurd things like ending the world."

"I completely agree."

"Yes. Rather, it's not whether such a person exists, but how could someone think like that — that's what I don't understand."

"....."

"It's not like there isn't any tragedy or misfortune, but isn't the world fundamentally kind? Of course, that might just be limited to me and the people around me, and there may be many more tragic and awful things out there, but I really can't believe that the world has any reason to end."

"It's probably not a reason, but an objective. What Saitou Takashi wishes for, no — rather than wishing, he's probably in the midst of searching for it. Trying to find it. Magokoro and I are probably just a part of it — making me his enemy is nothing more than one course of events."

"The end... of the world."

"Well..... For the fox-masked man, what you and I are talking about is definitely completely off-topic. The point we're questioning is off. For the fox-masked man, **wanting to read an interesting novel until the end is only natural**; that's probably the extent of his feelings."

"....."

"Not just reading the same page again and again, he quickly wants to finish it, this world known as the Story. You could say that his experiment... is somewhat like speed reading."

"Speed reading....."

Right.

That was accelerating.

"The world is interesting — that's what he said. Hey, Hikari-san. Among the people living in this world, among those six billion people, just how many can say those words? Precisely. 'It's peaceful', or something like that, even we can say it. But..... There aren't many in this world who can honestly affirm that they find the world unbelievably interesting."

".....Right. Also....." Hikari-san looked down. "That's not the line of someone like Saitou Takashi, who has led a dramatic life. In that sense, it is far from the normal course of things."

"Also, he said that he doesn't want to die. It seems that was the origin. He doesn't want to see this interesting world off half-assedly right in the middle — he wants to live until the world ends. The ER3 System..... At that time called the ER2 System, he entered that organization during his days as a young boy, but maybe that wasn't a good thing. He was too greedy--- too young, and unfortunately, he was too qualified."

"But..... Isn't that a contradiction? His experiment of trying to end the world and his wish to not die."

"They're the same thing. For Saitou Takashi, the theory behind the two are the same. If he can see the world's end, he doesn't mind dying — and, he can't die without having seen the world's end. Either not dying or seeing the world's end, those were two choices — no, two of the same choice, I should say."

"....."

Hikari-san made an unusually disgusted expression, as if she'd had enough.

"It's absurd."

"As expected of Aikawa Jun's father, we might say."

"I... don't really want to believe that, though. Aikawa-san — she isn't that kind of person."

"But they definitely share an absolute root. Conceit all the way from heaven to earth, you might call it. I've thought about it a lot..... but if there's any difference between those two — that is probably the existence of a clear objective, or lack thereof."

"What do you mean?"

"To put it simply, well, ten years ago, those two died. Well, in reality, they revived like in a manga, but because of that, those two **were expelled from causality** — said Saitou Takashi. They are alive, but it's almost like they died — I think that was the meaning."

"Haah."

"The problem is in the difference in their actions after that. Saitou Takashi chose a different method of achieving his objective, by trial and error. In that ten year gap, he said he tried a lot of things. For that, he needed limbs."

"Limbs — The *Thirteen Stairs*, is it?"

"I don't know when that name started being used, but — that's right. He needed limbs to take his part in the Story. Contrary to that, Aikawa-san chose the way of becoming other people's limbs."

".....A contractor."

"Yes..... that's probably the difference between Saitou Takashi, who held an objective, and Aikawa-san, who was created for that objective..... Ah, no, sorry, it's not like I'm going somewhere with this. It's just what I think."

"That would mean... until we stop Saitou Takashi's objective itself — this will never end. **This thing**... would never end."

"Exactly. I thought that last month, when I was called to Sumiyuri Academy, it was in order for us to settle things with each other, but — thinking about it now, that was just rationalizing it."

"Rationalizing?"

"The fox-masked man may use another word for it..... but essentially, it's like when Miiko-san was involved. Saitou Takashi wanted a link between us, a connection between him and me, he wanted to make it **clear** — that's what I think. Using Magokoro. You could see Magokoro's appearance as just an event to introduce himself."

"....."

"He said that Izumu-kun's involvement became necessary. Originally, he wanted to let him retire, but the fox-masked man forcibly put Izumu-kun on the stage. That was to show me Magokoro's power, Magokoro's overwhelming power..... The part of Magokoro that changed..... probably. Because it seems he didn't intend to let us meet, the current situation is unexpected for the fox-masked man....."

"Then, what should we do to end it?" Hikari-san said, as if she was troubled. "An end to his objective..... That is pretty vague. Too vague, like drawing on muddy water. Even if we fail multiple times, the fox-masked man will probably try again as many times as he can."

"Yeah. At the very least, that's what he's done until now. Therefore, even if he throws away the theory of making me his enemy, he'll just choose another means. If you ask me, it's a vicious cycle."

"I think so too."

"If possible, I want to stop that vicious cycle....."

"But — you can't kill him, can you?"

Hikari-san said.

"Repeating your words from earlier, unless the world ends or he dies, Saitou Takashi won't stop. But you — you cannot kill people, I think."

"You don't know me enough, Hikari-san. If it's absolutely necessary — even I..."

"Can you kill? Really, absolutely, without any doubt, if you say you can kill, can you?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't kill."

I ended up yielding in front of that barrage of questions.

Before, I would have left it uncertain.

Now, I.

I recognized that I had people I wanted to protect.
I'm sure I couldn't kill.
I probably couldn't kill people.
That — I needed to be aware of it.
I needed to be sharply aware of it.
For other people's sake,
for my sake,
the me who thought he could kill people —
was surely no more.
Not anywhere.
".....Um."
Hikari-san reformulated.
"Just one thing — could I ask one thing that trespasses my authority?"
"Anything."
"But it's a question that goes far above my rights as an attendant."
"Please, don't mind it. It's between Hikari-san and I."
"How did you get close to Magokoro-san?"
"....."
It was a shock to be asked that so smoothly. Because I didn't think it would be that kind of question, my words got stuck for a moment.
But — it wasn't really something I had to hide.
It wasn't something to hide at this point.
From here on, Magokoro would surely cause Hikari-san trouble, so I probably needed to tell her, actually.
I,
"Err, you see."
I cut right to the point, without getting worked up.
"It's an old story, so my memories of it are pretty vague — the details of when I was at the ER3 System..... Maybe you already know, but I'll explain it just in case. When I was in middle school, I caused the Kunagisa Syndicate some trouble."
"Was Tomo-san involved?"
"She was. Both Kunagisa and her brother, Kunagisa Nao — it seems he was recently promoted to the top of the organization — as well as Nao-san's friend, Kasumioka Douji; they were the main cast for me. Well, the result of that trouble was wretched and unsightly — the poor and good-for-nothing Nonsense User inevitably had to escape to another country."

".....Was Tomo-san's isolation a result of that incident too?"

"Generally, yes. Though it wasn't really the result of a defeat... No, I guess it's kinda similar. In the end, Nao-san was the only one to come out of it unscathed. Kasumioka-san is... currently missing."

Missing. I didn't know how accurate those words are, but that's what I said. With Nao-san becoming the chairman and Kunagisa coming back to the organization, I wondered how he would be treated — it was something I was personally curious about, but in the end, I was outside of the net. Even if I came to know something, it would probably be as a result of it ending.

"Escaping overseas — through Nao-san's guidance. Parting with Kunagisa, all alone. So I participated in the ER3 System's ER Program, the abroad student program....."

"Yes, I am aware. So, there — you met Magokoro?" Hikari-san said, unsatisfied. "But..... Then, wouldn't that mean that Magokoro-san is of the same age or older than master? Magokoro-san doesn't look to be that old at all."

"....."

I wanted to tell her to look in a mirror.

Hikari-san, who looked about as old as a middle schooler.

Twenty seven years old.

Also,

"The same as — Kunagisa Tomo."

"Ah..... Right. That's right, thinking about it, Tomo-san too — she is of the same age as master."

"Yes..... Well, returning to the main point. I passed the exam and moved to the other side of the world. I lived in a dormitory and Omokage Magokoro was in the same room."

".....I heard that the ER Program's exam was quite difficult."

"Yeah, so it seems."

"You were smart, master."

"No, it really was a hard exam. But, for me — it was simple."

Right, simple.

Too simple.

For me.

Compared to living.

"Perhaps Nao-san did some shady deals behind the scenes." I jokingly said, and continued to talk. "We lived in the same room — but I later learned

that Magokoro wasn't really an abroad student from Japan that passed the exam."

".....The Orange Seed."

"Yes — an experimental subject."

MS-2.

The section inherited from Saitou Takashi.

The place that had previously created Aikawa Jun.

The Holy Land and the Hell that gave birth to Humanity's Strongest.

"Even though she was an experimental subject, she wasn't confined all year and treated like a guinea pig — rather, seeing how she would act in everyday life and in society interested them much more. Maybe situational reaction experiments were the main goal."

"Master, when did you learn that?"

"Learned what?"

"That Magokoro was an experimental subject."

Like Kuchiha-chan,

or Utsurigi.

"After we got along well, I heard about it from an adult."

".....So they didn't hide it?"

"It seemed more like an open secret. Even apart from Magokoro, it seemed there were other test subjects in the program. I'm not that knowledgeable about that..... I don't think there were that many..... but among them — Magokoro was off the charts."

"Off... the charts."

"The final form of humanity."

I said, while remembering the past.

"In that sense, maybe experimental subject isn't a very fitting word. Not an experimental subject or a test subject but — a complete subject."

"....."

"Even then, from what I could see, Omokage Magokoro wasn't as powerful as Aikawa Jun, though—"

Though there was no way the me of that time had understood that,

now I understood.

Thinking rationally, MS-2 was —

trying to artificially recreate Aikawa Jun.

It matched timewise.

It was after the accident with Aikawa-san and Saitou Takashi, which Aikawa Junya and Kajou Akira had also been involved in — a few years after that.

Same as when Assistant Professor Kigamine continued using Kuchiha-chan, even after Saitou Takashi had left — MS-2 had continued using Magokoro after Saitou Takashi left them.

.....

The words 'root of all evil' come to my mind.

That was probably accurate.

The causality that person, Saitou Takashi, left behind in this world, before he was expelled from it... it's just too awful.

Well..... That was why.

That was why I thought that, between Saitou Takashi and Zerozaki Hitoshiki, there must have been something concrete that could serve as a weapon if I learned of it.

That's why I was waiting for the result of Kouta-san's research.

"Trying to recreate Aikawa-san..... Is it? But why would they—"

"Probably with the same logic as kids creating plastic models of battleships. There is no reason. That's how the ER3 System is. I, after entering it, I understood it very well. Very well. Those guys have no objective. In that sense, they might have been continuing after Saitou Takashi, who was their opposite—"

Having no pride.

Holding no integrity.

Keeping no attachments.

Expressing no complaints.

That broken ER3 System's four clauses.

He drew a firm line between him and the *Killing Names*, the *Cursing Names*, The Four Gods and One Mirror, the Kunagisa Syndicate and all the other residents of those hidden worlds. He operated as nothing more than a common person.

But, just because he was a common person didn't mean he was inferior.

Moeta-kun had said it too, but in the end, he was the resident of the *Normal World* who held the most power.

A normal... scariness.

He had no principles or contention.

"On the same level as wishing to see the end of the world, they aimlessly tried to recreate Aikawa Jun. I'm sure of it. That train of thought, naturally, it's not like I can't understand it. Wanting to be able to run fast or do hard calculations, just like those childish aspirations — it's precisely because they lack concreteness that they hold the same weight as an objective to them. That's how it is, Hikari-san. It's the same principle as your original master gathering geniuses on her island."

"If you explain it like that, I can't possibly say anything back."

It's cowardly, said Hikari-san, puffing her cheeks.

Cute.

If she did a face like that, I couldn't say anything back either.

"Anyway, Magokoro was an important goal in the ER3 System's research — and its conclusion. .....Let's talk about that after stuffing our stomachs a bit more."

".....?"

"It seems that I had a role to play in MS-2's research myself. Magokoro's supervisor and caretaker."

".....Were you doing it on purpose?"

"No, I was unaware. I thought I was simply hanging out with Magokoro. At that time, I was kind of... both alive and dead. **I wasn't necessarily conscious of what I was doing**. It's just — in my mind, I'd been overlapping Kunagisa and Magokoro."

"Tomo-san..."

"Ever since I was a kid, I've been someone with a lot of lingering attachment. The kind that could only measure anyone with myself or Kunagisa as a comparison."

Though I'd been doing the same with Kunagisa.

Little sister.

At the core there is my little sister's..... existence.

"But, well, because of that, we were able to become friends. Though I don't know when we got closer or the details of how our friendship had started, but that's natural."

".....Maybe that's just how human relationships are."

"But, that wasn't good." I said. "Omokage Magokoro, *The Orange Seed*; I was apparently the only human who could naturally become friends with her — so I was once again seized with special attention."

"Because master can become friends with anyone."

"That again? Houko-chan said something like that too..... Could you quit it? it's not like that. I was just dull. Just a dropout. I couldn't keep up with the content of the lessons at all. I was trying to scrape by."

Makeshift was — my specialty.

I was able to get by with tricks and showboating.

The Nonsense User's real ability.

Without learning and without shame.

"And it was thanks to Magokoro that this dropout was somehow able to survive in the program. I was always under watch."

"....."

"You know, halfway through it, I'd unconsciously noticed it. That girl — **someone was doing something to her**, more than she let on. Luckily, I had some **previous knowledge** at my disposal."

Kunagisa Tomo.

A genius from birth.

Called the Blue Savant.

She was controlling the Kunagisa Syndicate from a young age.

"But..... I couldn't do anything. No, I... didn't do anything. Because I knew there was nothing I could do. I just blankly watched over her."

"That's not like you." Hikari-san said. "You say that, but I bet you did something, didn't you?"

".....A tiny bit. Just a tiny bit — I did the same thing I always do. The thing I've repeated enough times up till now to get sick of it — the very same thing."

"....."

".....But it really was just a tiny bit, right at the end. And, it didn't accomplish anything."

That's why,

it was like I didn't do anything.

"Our relationship continued until she died. The last experiment was a failure and Omokage Magokoro burned to death in a conflagration."

".....My condolences."

"No, but, she ended up surviving."

"Right. .....Why is that?"

"The only possibility I can think of is that I, the *friend*, was no longer necessary..... I became a nuisance, so the ER3 System, MS-2, faked her *death* to separate the two of us—"

But — that was unthinkable.

I saw Magokoro dying.

The orange burning,

The orange disappearing in the flames,

I witnessed it.

I was a witness.

I was a victim,

And a perpetrator.

".....Well, my relationship with Magokoro — broadly speaking, it was like that. How was it, Hikari-san? It was boring, or rather, not that big of a deal at all, wasn't it?"

"No, as I'd thought, it was too much to ask." Hikari-san said, admirably apologetic. "If I worsened your mood, please feel free to punish me however you want, master."

"....."

Sometimes, the things this person said really sounded like they were enticing me.....

I felt I'd lose to that temptation someday.

Though, at the point I thought something like that, I'd already lost half the battle.

"Not really.... It's fine. I'm used to a life of exposing my shame. It's just—" I averted my eyes and said, as if talking to myself. "—Maybe it was my fault. That's what I thought..... in the end."

".....?"

"I turn my surroundings crazy just by existing it seems. According to the words of a young and gorgeous strategist, I attract misfortune and calamities. I have a constitution that attracts accidents."

"That's probably a false accusation."

"Maybe."

"And even if that really is the case, it's not your responsibility. You don't have to feel ashamed of it one bit, as it is not your fault."

"....."

"You can't get tunnel-visioned on those heroic feelings and lose sight of what you must do now, master."

".....Right."

"For starters—"

And then.

Hikari-san took my right arm.
And crossed it with her left arm.
Then softly brought her body closer.
"……!?"
"Quietly."
"Quietly, you say—"
Bre-breasts.
In reality it wasn't bad at all,
The sensation of Hikari-san's chest.
I-I can't calm down.
Don't be so confused, my heart!
Don't panic from just this much!
You aren't a middle schooler, are you…….!
"Master."
In contrast,
Hikari-san spoke in a small, whispered voice.
In a serious tone.
"Stay still and listen."
"……?
"It seems we've been followed for a while."

2

We'd ended up walking quite a bit while we were talking.

In front of me, I could see the Kyoto public office.

We came out to Oike street.

In front of me was a pedestrian crossing.

The light was red.

For now, Hikari-san and I were pretending to wait for the signal with our arms still crossed. Since the signals along the north and south directions stay on red for quite a while around here, it should give us enough time to plan for our future actions.

I see,

now that she'd said it, I realized it too.

I felt a gaze clinging to me.

Visual perception is just what the eyes see, so what I was actually feeling wasn't a gaze but a presence, I should say. But anyway, we were being tailed I think.

Thinking about it, there was a presence like that.

Though I don't know where it came from or when it started.

Anyway, someone was now behind us, a bit further away.

".....When did you notice it?"

"I just became certain of it now." Hikari-san said in a small voice, so small you could've easily missed it. The sort of voice that needed real skill to vocalize. "It's just..... I can't call it very skillful. The reason I didn't notice it until now was simply because I was focused on our conversation. Just carelessness."

"It was the same for me, too."

It was also unexpected.

They should have been in a state of emergency because Magokoro escaped. I'd thought they wouldn't have had the time to bother with me.

Hmm.....

However..... Since we'd noticed it, the tailing was quite unskillful.

Really bad, actually.

It was an amateur. A big amateur. Even now, having stopped walking, I could tell without even having to turn back. Or maybe they were thinking that getting found out would be fine from the beginning..... No, it didn't feel like that. If they'd been upfront about it, maybe, but they were unnaturally sneaky, so it was absolutely not that.

".....Hikari-san. Soon..... in about ten seconds, the light will turn red. What should we do?"

"We can't tell how dangerous they are..... For now, to maintain this situation, we should cross the road naturally."

"Right."

From red to green.

Hikari-san and I stepped in.

"I am more concerned for Magokoro-san than for us here."

".....Since Nanananami's at the apartment, it's fine. She's much more reliable than me."

"That's quite..... the trust you put in her."

"Because she's a witch. Other than burning her, there is no way to destroy her." I said. "And even if I am concerned by that, it's more important for now to decide how to deal with our pursuer."

"Yes....."

"What should we do in this kind of situation?"

So I asked. Regardless of whether that person was Hikari-san or Teruko-san, as one of Akagami Iria's maids, she definitely had that kind of information in her head.

"The ways of dealing with it depend on the circumstances, so I cannot speak generally, but there are usually two main choices. To put it simply, either lose them or catch them."

"Which one's more advantageous?"

"If I had to say, catching them would be better."

"Then let's do that."

We crossed the street.

Then, we went East on Oike street,

and descended underground.

Underground —

The Tozai subway line, station of Kyoto public office.

We bought two tickets.

".....Will it be alright? Even if you want to catch them, they might be a dangerous person. If I remember correctly, the Miotsukushi Sisters of the *Thirteen Stairs* were aiming for master —"

"It seems that the one tailing us is alone, so I don't think it can be them."

"Being alone may just be a lure."

"Yeah..... I didn't think of that possibility. But..... Well, even then, that pursuer is just too shabby. It's probably too much, even for a lure."

"That's right..... Surely."

Hikari-san agreed too.

Of course, even if it was unreasonable to compare them to *Nureginu the Concealed*, that pursuer's tailing was way too horrible.

"Since we didn't notice it until a moment ago, we can't exactly afford to say something pretentious... But, even if that is bait, they're planning to do something anyway, right? Then we should create that opportunity ourselves."

".....That composure is quite impressive."

Hikari-san smiled.

"So I will accompany you."

"If it gets dangerous, please run away alone, okay?"

"Spare me your jokes."

Passing through the ticket gate, onto the platform,

we wait in line for the train.

The train, huh.

I couldn't help but think of Moeta-kun. I unconsciously started paying close attention to our backs, but Nureginu-san was no longer here and we weren't lined up right at the front, so that was probably an unfounded worry.

The train arrived.

It stopped.

The doors opened and the people started getting off —

Hikari-san and I entered a wagon.

The announcement signaling the departure rang.

The warning sound rang.

When the doors were just about to close, we jumped off.

The doors closed.

The train departed.

I looked next to me.

Likewise, someone else had jumped off the train.

"Ah."
It was a highschool girl.

Hair dyed brown in a modern style and a uniform with a short skirt.
Charming red glasses.
Overall, a small stature.
"....."
"....."
"....Well done."
I was praised.
.....No, why are you praising me?
".....Um, master..... Is this an acquaintance?"
"No, I don't know her....."
The suspicious Hikari-san and the bewildered me.
I really didn't know her.
Now that the train had departed and the passengers all left the station, the highschool girl struck a pose.
"Fufu! Even if you don't know me, I know you, *Ii-chan*!"
".....Hah. Is that so....."
Ah, no.
She called me *Ii-chan*.
Which meant —
"Right!"
The highschool girl said in a loud voice.
"Fifth step of the *Thirteen Stairs*! Why should I hide it — Furuyari Zukin is none other than me!"
I...
I-I don't know..... Errr.....
I was amazed? No.....
Speechless? Not that either.....
Yeah.
I struggled for a reaction.
".....Say something. It's embarrassing."
"No..... I just thought you were too commonplace."
"Commonplace?"
The highschool girl — Zukin-chan was astonished.
Umm.....

After a swimsuit with a lab coat, someone full of bandages, and *Nureginu the Concealed*, just a brown haired high school girl wasn't enough to establish her character.

"Don't say I can't establish my character!"

"....."

An ordinary retort.

Umm.

If I had to say, she was closer to Kino-san.....

But Kino-san was really incredible.

Then, was this girl actually incredible too?

She should have been, right?

"Fuh!"

For some reason, Zukin-chan smiled boldly.

An ordinary boldness.

"This time, you were able to see through me, but next time, it won't go like that! Remember th— "

"There's no way we'll let you escape."

Zukin-chan had already turned on her heel and was about to make a break for it when I grabbed her uniform's large collar.

"Gueh!"

It seemed I'd strangled her, but even that reaction was ordinary.

What was with that girl.....

I could read her every move.

"Let go of me! Eeey! Kill me if you want!"

"Got it."

I pushed her on the railway.

Kyaah, she screamed ordinarily.

"Now, let's go, Hikari-san."

"Eh, but....."

"What? That was just an optical illusion."

"No, but....."

"An illusion, an illusion."

Climbing the stairs, we showed our tickets to the station attendant and got reimbursed. Then, taking the same route we came through, we got to the surface.

Ooh.

Now that I looked at it, the public office sure was big.....

Like a castle.

"Are you trying to kill me?!"

Cheh.

So she'd followed us.

Well, I knew that there were ten minutes left until the next train.

I turned back in a melancholic mood.

"Err..... Zukin-chan? Furuyari Zukin-san?"

"Exactly."

For some reason, she put on airs.

A high-handed attitude.

"The Swordsmith?"

"Yes, that's right. So you know about me. Fufufu, I will praise you for that."

".....I'll give you some candy, so go wait over there, Zukin-chan."

"Yaay, a candy.....Who wants that?!"

"....."

She ordinarily went along with the joke.

I was a bit surprised.

I handed her yogurt flavoured candy I had in my pocket, invited Hikari-san with my hand and got away about ten meters from Zukin-chan.

".....What do you think?"

"I..... can't decide."

"Umm..... I can't make anything out, either."

"How is she compared to the other *Thirteen Stairs*?"

"How?..... Well .....It's not like I've met all of them, so I can't say much, but....."

I glanced back and looked at her.

She was licking the candy and quietly waiting.

Hmmm..... The surroundings of Shinkyogoku were teeming with high schoolers on school trips, so I was familiar with them to a certain extent, but this girl, Zukin-chan, was just too normal.

You could say she had no presence.

Her aura was like that of a background character.

"If you forced me to give my opinion, I can only see her as a high schooler....."

"Me too..... But she named herself as one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, and she called me *Ii-chan*."

"But, would *Thirteen Stairs* have someone that normal?"

"That's the problem....."

Originally, the *Thirteen Stairs* were assembled by the fox-masked man to become his limbs, so they should have been a gathering of weirdos. Even if their purpose had become to oppose me, I couldn't imagine that basic principle changed completely, that it disappeared completely. In the first place, from his way of speaking, the fox-masked man held a high impression of Furuyari Zukin as a Swordsmith.....

.....Mm?

Huh, hold on.

If I remembered correctly, Furuyari Zukin.....

"Don't talk sneakily! It's not manly!"

It seemed that, after finishing the candy, Zukin-chan quickly approached us.

I said "Hey, Zukin-chan."

"I heard that Furuyari Zukin was an elder."

"....."

"That he was an elder famous for his works."

"....."

"Where are you facing?"

"W-who?"

"What?"

"Who did you hear that from!? One-sidedly assuming I'm a liar! Answer me, who'd you hear it from!?"

"Mister fox."

"That guy! That guy is the one lying."

"So you're calling him 'that guy'?"

"Fuh."

Once again, Zukin-chan ordinarily smiled boldly.

In a lively way.

I prepared myself, ready to hear some important facts, but Zukin-chan just kept pointing at me without uttering a word. Eventually, she powerlessly dropped her finger.

".....?"

".....E-errr."

She'd immediately become unsure.

"Um..... It's because I'm the twelfth."

"What?"

"Mister fox was talking about the eleventh one."

"..... Err..... In other words." I hastily tried to process it. ".....You, Furuyari Zukin the Swordsmith, are the twelfth one, is that it?"

"Yes."

She was clearly playing the kid.

She was cute, but merely just cute, so she wasn't really that cute.

However — the twelfth one?

What was this highschool girl saying?

".....What do you mean?"

I had to ask.

Zukin-chan quickly lowered her gaze and said.

"You, are you by any chance a person that can keep secrets?"

Enough with the performance, just hurry up and say it.

Well, I'll go along with your act. I quietly nodded. This time, she really did say a shocking truth.

"**I am my grandfather's replacement**."

".....Replacement?"

Replacement — representative?

Alternative...?

"Grandpa was the eleventh, and last month..... Err, I think it was last month, he entered that *Thirteen Stairs* thing. Invited by mister fox."

"Yeah."

Errr..... Since Furuyari Zukin was the fifth step, mister fox must have contacted them quite early on. Of course, even mister fox wouldn't have decided on the later members of *Thirteen Stairs* randomly, so he'd probably known them from beforehand.....

"But grandpa, his health hadn't been that great recently. So I had to care for him."

"Care? You had? Zukin-chan had?"

"Can't be helped. We have no other relatives. And we can't really put the legendary swordsmith in a retirement home."

"....."

Seeing her saying that bashfully, I got a slightly better impression of her.

So she was a grandpa's kid.....

I felt like her character had finally been established a bit.

"We're basically always behind the scenes, so that was fine..... But beginning with this month, his health started getting really bad."

"And?"

"He died."

"....."

That was heavy.....

She casually talked about such a heavy thing.

That was a surprise attack.

"So, I'm the replacement."

".....Yeah."

"Since I'm the twelfth."

".....Yeah."

"Hihii."

"....."

Err..... What should I say?

It was certainly typical of mister fox, but.....

It was a sloppiness typical of mister fox, but.....

"We probably should have had Emoto-san look at him. But grandpa hated doctors. Well, he was able to live to ninety-eight, so it was a peaceful death."

".....That was an ordinary comment, too."

Saying that, I decided to ask what I'd been curious about. If we were to ask something critical, we would normally be digging our graves. However, this girl seemed airheaded, so it should've been fine to some extent.

"Um, errrr, do other members of the *Thirteen Stairs* know about you replacing your grandfather?"

"Mm? No, I still haven't met any other people. I also just heard about Emoto-san from mister fox. That she was a person of character, very refined and cool; an extremely splendid doctor."

"....."

Why was he fooling her, that man?

Unconsciously lying all the time.

"Mister fox should have introduced me to everyone already, but some trouble happened and there hasn't been a good time. So unless mister fox mentioned it to everyone, I guess they don't know?"

"Hmm....."

Then I could understand why Emoto-san didn't say a word about it when we were talking at the Imperial Garden.

I think that the *trouble* she was referring to was Magokoro's escape..... But perhaps Zukin-chan didn't know about that? No, it was dubious whether she even knew about Magokoro in the first place.

The fox-masked man — was he hiding it?

Setting aside whether it was meaningless or not.

Then I shouldn't touch upon that carelessly.

Alternative..... huh.

She was probably here just to fill in the numbers, and the fox-masked man has no intention of making her participate in this battle. Izumu-kun probably only knew about the eleventh one too.

".....Well, it's fine."

I sighed.

I kinda didn't care.

I felt like I'd been strained for no reason.

"Then let's go home, Hikari-san."

"Eh..... Ah, but we need to ask why she was tailing us."

"Ah, right. Hey Zukin-chan, why did you?"

"Don't ask as if you don't care!"

I was ordinarily retorted at.

I didn't take any damage.....

"Was it mister fox's order?"

"Wrong! It's my will!"

"Heeh....."

Was she kind of angry?

Maybe she was just full of energy.

Zukin-chan continued in an enthusiastic tone.

"When I went to the city for once to buy some things, I coincidentally happened to spot you, *Ii-chan*!"

"....."

What an unpleasant coincidence.....

But I didn't think that she'd been following us since we left the rundown apartment, so it was probably as she'd said.

I was beat.

Since the *Thirteen Stairs* were currently scattered all over the place, well, among the possible coincidences, it was one of the more passable ones..... She ended up being harmless, so that might've been somewhat of a silver lining.

"So — having spotted the *enemy*, as one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, you couldn't overlook it..... Is that how it is?"

In front of the Kyoto public building.

To enter a fight here — there were too many people.

Too many witnesses.

I think it would've been impossible.

But this situation.

This situation.

That bunch had even entered the hospital.

So it wasn't unthinkable.

"Of course that's not the case!"

"....."

I was met with a severe retort.

I took no damage, but it was shocking.

".....Is that wrong?"

"Yes! I entered the *Thirteen Stairs* because Mister fox said I didn't have to do anything!"

"Aah..... So that's how it is."

If you thought about it normally, that's how it should've been.

She was a high schooler.

She hadn't commuted to Sumiyuri Academy.

She didn't seem to be immortal, either.

"So.... Then, why?"

"I have a request!"

"....."

I was about to question if that was the attitude of someone requesting something, but I felt it would've been too ordinary, so I stopped.

Zukin-chan approached me hurriedly.

"The knife! Give it to me, please!"

".....Eh?"

"You have it, don't you!? The knife!"

"Well, I have a few, but....."

Which one was she talking about?

Errr, I would guess.....

"Aah. Furuyari Zukin, the anti lock knife your grandfather forged? And, being its creator, you're asking me to return it under the name of Furuyari Zukin?"

"Wrong! Don't play dumb!"

".....No, I'm not playing dumb."

"You're the one holding it, aren't you — *Unsigned*!"

"Unsigned.....?"

Mm.....

I wasn't gonna understand it if you abruptly brought out such peculiar names.

"Master, master." Hikari-san pulled my sleeve. "Isn't it about that? The one you received from Aikawa-san, the small knife."

"Right, that!"

Even though she probably didn't know, Zukin-chan screamed.

She really was a loud girl.

"If I remember correctly..... I heard about it from Aikawa-san." In a composed manner, like she was used to this, Hikari-san ignored Zukin-chan and explained it to me. "That small knife..... I think it was named that. At that time, I was shown the original one, so there should be no mistake."

"Huh..... I didn't know the name. Though I heard it had a name like a woman in BlackJack."

"I'm saying that's it!"

Zukin-chan said.

Looking closely, she wore quite the serious expression.

To the point I was about to feel intimidated.

"Th-that — please!"

"Please, you say..... As you heard, it's something I received from someone, so I can't give it away that easily. You should understand that, at lea—"

"I'll do anything! I'll accept any condition! I have to return with *Unsigned*!"

".....First, please stop yelling so loudly. We'll talk after that, Zukin-chan."

I shouldn't take her lightly — I thought.

I could've done it if I tried, but I shouldn't have in this situation.

But even if we didn't enter combat, there were too many people, so it wasn't a well-suited place for a serious conversation.

"Hikari-san. Is there anywhere nearby where we can talk?"

"I think master would be more knowledgeable about the surrounding area than me....."

"Yes, but since I live here, there are things I don't know. I want Hikari-san's opinion as a pro."

"Mm..... Then, there."

Where Hikari-san pointed, further towards the east, flowing under the Oike Great Bridge —

The Kamogawa river.

I don't think there's any need to elaborate on it.

A spot to the west, after going along the river for a bit.

By the way, during this time slot, the Kamogawa river is filled with couples.

So.

Hikari-san's idea.

Hikari-san at my left, Zukin-chan at my right.

Naming it the 'flower in both hands' formation.

"....."

"....."

".....What happened? Ah, you're shy, aren't you?"

Hikari-san seemed to be having fun.

Even I was starting to have fun, just by looking at her.

About that, she can both seem to be and not be accustomed to the world, like she can seem to be exactly as her appearance of a middle schooler makes her to be, or like her actual age of twenty-seven makes her to be, anyway it felt like that.

But, well, certainly..... being mixed up among the couples of Kamogawa was a good idea..... but wasn't it somewhat of an ethical concern? I wondered if there were any policemen around.....

"Originally, you see."

Zukin-chan began to talk.

"It's because Grandpa would receive *Unsigned* that he joined the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"So mister fox promised it?"

"Yes. He said that."

"I see....."

The fact that I possessed the small knife, *Unsigned*, the fact that Aikawa-san handed it to me; I'm sure those were things you could learn with a bit of research..... But, again, what a lavishly empty promise.

"But grandpa died before receiving *Unsigned*..... Before he passed away, he said that was a big regret, so he...."

"He told you?"

"Yes."

Somehow,

Zukin-chan suddenly became docile.

Rather than docile, she became meek.

Maybe until just a moment ago, she'd been trying to forcibly raise the tension by being loud and making a clamor.

"That's why, please give it to me."

Even then.

Zukin-chan said clearly.

Without hesitating, she demanded it.

"At the very least, I want to put it... in front of his grave."

".....So did Zukin-chan join the *Thirteen Stairs* for the same reason?"

"Exactly. Is that bad?"

"Not really."

It's unknown how serious the fox-masked man was. Even disregarding the situation with Magokoro, it seemed like he had no intention of introducing Zukin-chan to the other *Thirteen Stairs* in the first place.....

Either on a whim, for appearances' sake, or by eccentricity.

The alternative..... the alternative of the eleventh one.

"But when I saw you..... I thought it would be faster if I directly asked you....."

"Certainly, that might be right."

"Then, then!"

Zukin-chan lit up with joy.

She really did seem joyful.

But I shook my head.

"Hold on..... The story isn't finished yet. Also, you promised not to scream, Zukin-chan."

".....Ah, right."

She nimbly looked the other way.

She seemed to be the kind of youngster that couldn't apologize.

Well, it was fine.

"I understand your reason..... but I still haven't heard your grandpa's. Why did the eleventh Furuyari Zukin want that small knife — that *Unsigned*? To the point of obeying the fox-masked man."

"That's....." Zukin-chan spoke hesitantly. "Errr..... How should I say it, I guess it's fine..... It was originally grandpa's, after all — I guess."

"So like that anti lock blade, that small knife was one of your grandpa's creations?"

"Wrong — *Unsigned* isn't one of grandpa's creations, though."

"Though, you say....."

"....."

Zukin-chan stopped talking.

I struggled to deal with it.

From the sidelines, Hikari-san tried to help,"Is it something hard to say?", though I wasn't sure whether she said that to me or Zukin-chan.

The one who received that help was Zukin-chan.

"It's not really... something to say to other people."

".....But."

"I understand, I understand, that you're just a third party and that you have no obligation even if I say something like this — 'if you want me to hand it over, shouldn't I at least hear the circumstances'?"

".....Well, it feels like that."

"But if I told you the circumstances, I don't know if you'd still be willing to hand over *Unsigned*. I don't have any insurance. If you say you will hand me *Unsigned* no matter what, then I'll tell you."

".....That condition isn't really fair. There's no balance. For me, for the current owner, hearing the story before making my decision feels like a natural right."

"As I said, I understand that. But, but — for me, if I said that, I wouldn't have anything else I could do....."

She couldn't show her trump card that easily, huh.

Hmm.

What... should I do?

This was an unexpected case.

But, well, you could say it'd been convenient. I was able to directly meet one of the *Thirteen Stairs* without any planning, and I could furthermore enter in contact in a relatively peaceful way — it certainly wasn't a bad deal for me.

On top of that, from how her story went, it seemed that the advantage was on my side, the alternative. I didn't know what kind of person her grandpa was, but Furuyari Zukin, that girl herself was an exceedingly ordinary existence.

This situation, these conditions, if I manage to handle them well — I may be able to remove a step from *Thirteen Stairs* without any trouble. If her objective for entering *Thirteen Stairs* was that small knife, if I were to yield it, Zukin-chan would no longer have any reason to stay with them. Even if Zukin-chan left, it would probably deal no damage to the fox-masked man, but a step was still a step.

Naturally, I couldn't forget to consider that this whole story was totally false. I had to admit that she was one of the *Thirteen Stairs* but — this situation, these conditions, they could very well be a skillful lie set up by her and mister fox.

However, it was unclear what meaning a lie like that would have.

Even if he stole the small knife from me, the situation wouldn't change much. With my skill, no matter which famous sword or butterfly knife I used, the effect would be the same in the end.

And.

While Zukin-chan was looking silently but worriedly at my thinking face, right then — the phone in my pocket rang.

"Ah..... sorry."

It felt like I dodged her question, and the atmosphere suddenly got dampened, but still I took out my cell phone. Since I was in the middle of an important conversation, I'd been thinking about turning it off.

However, I didn't do it.

What was displayed was Kouta-san's number.

Then, I had no choice but to answer.

I said "Hold on a minute.", stood up, brushed off the grass on my pants, and took some distance from Hikari-san and Zukin-chan. Hearing Zukin-chan's dissatisfied voice behind me, I answered.

"I am here to report, dear friend."

Kouta-san's report was extremely concise.

"It seems that the Zerozaki clan was annihilated."

ACT 15 - DEFENSELESS END

0

Making a decision with too little information is taking a leap.
Like an explosive.

1

Fifteenth of October — Saturday.

The promised day with Emoto-san.

The meeting with the puppeteer, Migishita Rurero.

Meeting Emoto-san at the Imperial Garden.

I was almost ready to hear that I couldn't meet her again today because she was unstable, but according to Emoto-san,

"It's fine."

So it seemed.

"Somehow..... she's recovered enough to be able to talk..... she's recovered. Her heart is also calm for now. Of course, she still can't move..... but I decided it was okay, as a doctor. I-it's not a lie, it's the truth. I-I swear it's true..... She can sufficiently..... su-sufficiently talk."

"Is that so — then."

Then there was another problem to take care of.

The present problem.

An extremely pragmatic problem.

How to get to where Rurero-san was accommodated, Assistant Professor Kigamine's laboratory, the former Saitou Clinic; the means of transport to get there.

In this case, the vespa and the Fiat would be a bad choice.

Both stood out too much.

It would have been fine if standing out didn't bother me, but I wanted to be as discreet as possible when going to talk to Rurero-san, and I was sure

that the vespa and Fiat I regularly used were known. Especially the vespa, since he saw me riding it. Even disregarding standing out or not, there was the license plate.....

Hearing that, Emoto-san said, "Y-you..... you could simply go, in my car's passenger seat..... couldn't you?"

Thinking about it, Emoto-san had been taking care of Rurero-san, so that meant she must have used a car when moving from outside the city to the Imperial Garden. I had completely overlooked the idea of her car.

Somehow..... Emoto-san and cars were like oil and water; the image didn't fit. I vaguely thought that she might have been going by taxi..... but it appeared she had been driving herself.

Hmm.

"That would mean you would have to accompany me back as well....."

"It's fine. I don't mind."

"Then....."

I guess I would rely on her.

And so, I was guided to where Emoto-san had illegally parked, near the Imperial Garden.

It was a white Mercedes Benz.

Naturally, an S class.

"....."

"What's wrong.....? Hurry, get in. Rurero-san..... I-I'm still a bit worried about her."

"I..... yes." I boarded in the passenger seat. "Um..... Err, this is an unrelated question, but this, is this your own car?"

"Yeah..... It is?"

"....."

I guess back-alley doctors earned a lot.

Black Jack.

No, culture shock.

"Mm.....The air conditioning may be a bit much. It's cold."

".....Right."

Emoto-san's driving skill, which I'd been worried about, was, although not particularly good, not overwhelmingly miserable. It was still tolerable; she passed. It would've probably been too cruel to compare it to Hikari-san's driving without a license, but once we left the city, the rest would only be mountain paths, so it should be fine.

"Aah..... Emoto-san."

"Wh..... wh-what could it be? Di-did I do something bad? E-errr, the wipers aren't moving..... The gear is correct....."

"No....."

I guess that didn't change her unstable mentality.

It might've been for the best to not talk to her.

But I would at least tell her about that.

"Um, on Wednesday — I met Zukin-chan."

"Huh..... Eh? Zukin-**chan**?"

"Ah, errr....."

Right, she didn't know.

I briefly explained the relation between the eleventh and the twelfth Furuyari Zukin blacksmiths to Emoto-san. That the eleventh Furuyari Zukin passed away earlier that month, that Zukin-chan inherited his name and that, at the same time, Zukin-chan substituted for him as the fifth step of the *Thirteen Stairs*. And — even about her objective as well.

Emoto-san said "Huuh." in a very impressed manner.

"I didn't..... know about this at all."

"Emoto-san, have you ever met the eleventh Furuyari Zukin?"

"I have..... He was a vigorous old man."

"Is that your observation as a doctor?"

"No..... It's not like I examined him. Just an impression. I'm not Sherlock Holmes, I can't figure everything out at first glance. For anything aside from surgery, I wouldn't know the details without palpating him. So I can't say anything preemptive."

"Is that so. If I remember correctly, she said he was ninety-eight. It might've just been his lifespan running out."

"Yes..... Fitting for his age. His body had grown weaker after all. He sometimes coughed, so I asked 'Should I examine you?', but..... he refused. I..... I'm sure, he h-hated me..... Uh-ughhh."

"Please don't cry while driving....."

Well, it seemed he really hated doctors.

I probably shouldn't mention that.

"But..... Um, mister fox also, does incomprehensible things. That girl..... Was she really a high schooler?"

"Yes. She had a student ID. However, it seems she barely ever commutes to school." Even the day we met was a weekday. "She's a grandpa's kid. Ever

since she was conscious, she's always been taking care of the eleventh — it seems. How should I say, like nursing."

"Nursing for the elderly..... it's not easy. Zukin-san seemed lively..... but even then, he couldn't..... have normal kids."

"Maybe."

On that point, I'd certainly underestimated her.

Zukin-chan.

Yes, I'd admit it.

"But — um, she doesn't seem to have much skill in blacksmithing. Even if it's not zero, she said herself that she was still in training."

".....Is that so."

"According to her, it seems she has the talent, but — to become great, she would need twenty or thirty more years. Though that's impressive in itself, she has no power at the moment. I judged her to be a very ordinary high school girl."

"Really..... I don't get it. Mister fox..... why would you involve..... a girl like that? It's not typical of mister fox..... or, rather. If he were to involve her as an enemy..... then okay..... Let's say it's okay. But involving her as an ally — it's weird."

"Even though he was keeping it a secret from the other *Thirteen Stairs*, I still think it was just to make up numbers, just to fill in the missing steps. Just one of his usual whims. There was probably no special meaning to it."

"....."

"Perhaps he was moved — she seemed desperate. She even said she'd do anything to retrieve *Unsigned*. Ordinarily, making a *request* to me, her supposed enemy, is something that shouldn't have been done. Even if I don't understand that part, that earnestness — was not common."

"But..... mister fox, is not someone who would be moved by that. He's not, kind like you, nor a good..... person, I think."

"I'm not kind either, nor a good person — have you heard anything? About why the eleventh Furuyari Zukin wanted back *Unsigned*."

"It's my first time hearing that he'd wanted it back..... Hmm. I wondered why Zukin-chan would join *Thirteen Stairs*..... but she had a proper objective."

"An objective..... Can we really call it that? For you, it was 'healing the injured', right? For Izumu-kun — I guess it was because Rizumu-chan had idolized mister fox. Kino-san was interested in mister fox, too..... For

Nureginu-san, it was their master's order..... By the way, do you know anything about Nureginu-san's master?"

"Not really..... I think they must be an acquaintance of mister fox, but that's just an assumption."

"Is that so. Well, it doesn't matter now..... For the Miotsukushi Sisters, judging from their actions, they must idolize mister fox like Rizumu-chan. According to Izumu-kun, it's the same for Ichirizuka Konomi, and Nureginu-san said that Rurero-san is like that too..... Though he said it himself, he really is popular with girls....."

It was like a harem, the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Though I had no intention of meddling with anyone's tastes.

"That reminds me, even though you're a woman, you don't have anything like that, do you? Idolization or intoxication for mister fox."

"....."

Emoto-san went silent.

I guess what I'd said was too harsh for someone who couldn't make any friends.

I returned to the main topic.

"In Magokoro's case, we can't really say she's officially part of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Since mister fox said it was twelve, plus one, people. If I had to guess, it would have been — **to meet me**. Then, the only ones left — "

Errr, how many had I said again?

There were too many to remember.

"Ah, Utage Kudan, Noise-kun, and Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"Right."

"Well, for an old member like Utage Kudan, I can somehow understand it..... but for Noise-kun and Tokinomiya Jikoku, I have no idea at all. Like Zukin-chan -- no, Zukin-san, they might have a concrete objective."

"I don't know. That might be a problem for when you talk to them eventually..... but, the current issue is Rurero-san, isn't it?"

".....Right."

"I shouldn't be saying it at this point, but..... even if it's not as bad as with Konomi-chan, it will be pretty hard to make her betray mister fox."

"Yes..... I was told the same thing by Nureginu-san."

"If it's you — you might be able to manage something, though."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're mister fox's enemy."

Emoto-san said that, and then closed her mouth.

I didn't understand the true meaning behind her words —

but for some reason, I refrained from asking about it.

It was that kind of atmosphere.

I went silent too.

……By the way — Zukin-chan.

I'd exchanged a promise with Furuyari Zukin the twelfth.

If I were to exaggerate, it was a ceasefire treaty.

Or maybe a non-aggression pact.

Unsigned.

In the end, I'd decided to hand it over to Zukin-chan. I still didn't understand her objective, but the blade known as *Unsigned* wasn't that important of a weapon to me.

I'd thought that the people who wanted it should take it.

To cite mister fox, a great weapon chooses its owner — right. Then, no matter how you think about it, I was not the one fit for *Unsigned*.

I didn't need a knife.

If you'd allow me to say something pretentious, having one in your heart was good enough.

However — naturally, it wasn't for nothing. As a concerned party, I couldn't trust her without being cautious.

Therefore, a credit transaction.

If, until the end of the month, **Zukin-chan doesn't set anything up against me** — at that time, with the absolute condition of hearing the eleventh's reason, I'd promised to hand *Unsigned* over to her. It didn't matter if that reason was something I would be satisfied with or not. Leaving the *Thirteen Stairs* was, of course, a given. Regarding that, Zukin-chan said that she'd joined the *Thirteen Stairs* for that reason in the first place, so she had no complaints, but it seems she hadn't understood the reason why I chose until the end of the month.

'If those are the conditions, I'll talk now, so hand it over immediately' — she demanded *Unsigned* with a hastiness typical of a youngster. However, the end of the month was itself a compromise.

Normally, I'd have said 'when everything was over'. When everything was over, at that time, if Zukin-chan had not shown any animosity towards me — that was the ideal condition.

But I couldn't ask that.

Because, to retrieve *Unsigned*, relying on the fox-masked man didn't bother Zukin-chan. She essentially just wanted to get her hands on *Unsigned*, without concern for ethics or attachments. Relying on the fox-masked man or me probably didn't make much of a difference.

Thus, I had to make a compromise.

A compromise.

That was, the end of the month.

Since Magokoro had come over to my side, the situation had changed — but, judging from what he'd said at Sumiyuri Academy, the fox-masked man probably intended to use last month's calm as an opening act, and then settle things for good this month.

In September, people don't die.

In October, people die.

He liked September,

and hated October.

That's what he'd said.

If I were to believe those words, the convergence point was this month.

Since October was an Achilles' heel,

he'd chosen October as the time of the battle.

Then,

at the very least, I would have Zukin-chan stay quiet the entire month. I decided that would be good enough. Even if that was some kind of trap, as long as I could seal her movements for a period of time, paying something in return wasn't unreasonable. Though — that was only if she was the kind of cunning person who could set up traps.

Anyhow, as of today, half a month had passed.

I had to somehow hold on for the other half.

I was rather preoccupied and worried about it, but **since my insurance didn't work anymore**, I had to choose that way.

"....."

Insurance, huh.....

On my side, too — after that phone call from Kouta-san, my plans had gone awry. Although I didn't have very high expectations from the start.....

Attack, defense, insurance.

Setting the defense aside — the attack.

Well, if Zukin-chan kept her promise with me — since she didn't have any connection with the other steps, after leaving the *Thirteen Stairs*, it was

natural for her to think she would be better off quietly returning home, as opposed to cooperating with me. Then, how would I act from now on..... For Magokoro's sake, I wanted to meet Tokinomiya Jikoku as soon as possible.....

No, it was unnecessary.

At the moment, that was unnecessary.

Don't think about anything unnecessary.

Now, I needed to focus — focus on Migishita Rurero.

The Puppeteer, Migishita Rurero.

Of course, it wouldn't go like with Emoto-san or Zukin-chan. Someone captivated by the charm, the charisma of mister fox,

someone with supernatural powers.

But I had to do it.

On the other hand, since she had a severe wound, she couldn't do anything to us — by having her, who was capable only of talking, as my first opponent, I would have some training for my eventual confrontation with Ichirizuka Konomi and the Miotsukushi Sisters. Since this was a performance I didn't have any control over, I don't know if training is the right word for it — but, at the very least, facing Rurero-san should have been a lot easier than Ichirizuka Konomi or the Miotsukushi Sisters.

Well, even if I couldn't make her an ally, at the very least, I needed to have the chains cast on Magokoro be released.

Only that.

".....How is Magokoro-chan doing?"

Emoto-san abruptly asked.

She was probably curious.

As a doctor.

"As usual — she's constantly waking up and falling back asleep. As long as she's calm, she can manage to stay awake for three hours a day."

"I see....."

"After examining her for the last few days, the problem seems to be the density of her consciousness."

"Density?"

"Yes. Well, I don't really want to say a bunch of random stuff in front of a doctor, but in short — think of when her mind is strained as *high density*, and *low density* for when her mind is calm. For example, when she is angry or acts violently, her mind becomes agitated, and that proportionally reduces her

active time. On the contrary, if she just sips tea on the veranda, she's able to function for a longer time."

"Heeh....."

"You could say that there's a total amount of *consciousness* that she can use every day. Tokinomiya Jikoku's Thought Manipulation — I heard from Aikawa-san that the *Tokinomiya* used *fear*..... and it really does seem to be that. I don't know what kind of dreams she sees, but when she's asleep, Magokoro is awfully peaceful."

".....So those are the chains you want to remove the most."

"Yes. I don't know to what extent Rurero-san's *puppeteer* power affects Magokoro, but — she's restraining her *physical body*, isn't she? Can I just understand that as restraining her movements?"

"I guess it's something like that..... Ask Rurero-san directly for details. **A power capable of turning people into puppets** — that's what I heard..... but I don't know any more."

"The name *Migishita* isn't in the *Killing Names* or *Cursing Names*, is it? Or maybe, like the *Miotsukushi*, it's some family's branch?"

"Who knows..... I don't think so."

Not someone who controlled puppets,

But someone who turned humans into puppets, huh.

Not a puppet user, but a puppeteer.

That was quite complex.

".....Umm, Ikkun. I-I know i-it's unnecessary and irritating, but..... Um, just in case, I should w-warn, or advise you....."

"I'm listening."

"Y-yes. You know, Rurero-san..... with this wound, I don't think she can do anything — but even though she shouldn't be able to do anything, regardless of that, thinking of that one-in-a-million chance, you should be prepared, I think."

".....What do you mean?"

"**Be careful... to not become a puppet**."

Hearing Emoto-san's words, I nodded.

Puppet.

A puppet with no heart.

That was... cruel.

Those words squeezed my heart.

"...I'm not a puppet."

So that Emoto-san couldn't hear it,
I mumbled that, in a voice only I could hear.

2

Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility — I should probably talk about it in past tense, but since her death hadn't been made public, it was still officially correct. On the second floor, in the room closest to the stairs, Rurero-san had been put to sleep.

Some kind of machinery that clearly must have been brought from the outside filled the room, and Rurero-san's body was connected to it in various places. I guess the technology already present in this facility was not enough to treat Rurero-san, or maybe it was just Emoto-san's obsession.

Either way was fine though.

Inside the room — well, it seems it had originally originally been used as a hospital room, so you could say it'd retrieved its former function — there was only me and Rurero-san, who sat atop the bed.

Emoto-san wasn't present.

I would've been grateful if she was here as a doctor, and she wasn't against that idea either, but if she were present — naturally, Migishita Rurero would've realized that Emoto Sonoki was a traitor.

That would have been really bad.

It would have been bad.

That's why we made it seem as if Emoto-san was absent and I snuck inside the building on my own; we acted under that somewhat clumsy pretense. I had Emoto-san drop me off at an appropriate place with her Benz, then walked up to the research facility on foot. As for the door that had been locked by Emoto-san when she left, naturally, as was customary, I took out the anti lock knife and opened it.

One hour — was what she said.

More than an hour of conversation was forbidden.

In one hour, Emoto-san would come.

I had until then.

However.....

Migishita Rurero — The Puppeteer.

"What's up..... I swear, good grief. So it's you — *Ii-chan*."

She —

as if she'd predicted my arrival beforehand, she eyed me and said that.

Since Rurero-san was tied with bandages, casts, corset, IVs, and other medical tools set up besides the bed, she couldn't move a muscle, not even her neck, so I had to enter her field of vision myself.

Even that field of vision — was cut in half.

The right eye.

"Sorry for this appearance. I'm in this pitiable state where I even have to make someone else take care of me down there, *Ii-chan*. For a cute young man like you, it should make for a pretty miserable sight — it's not something to look at."

"That's not true." Saying that, I moved to the center of Rurero-san's field of vision and rested my back against the wall. "I don't dislike seeing an injured woman. It's beautiful — that's what I think."

"Hooh. You talk big."

Rurero-san spoke casually.

With a strength that made you question if she really was severely injured.

"Even ignoring that, I pretty much never cease to get injuries. With you, at least, I feel a certain affinity."

"Selfish pity isn't very pleasant. If you have any business here, could you just hurry up and get on with it?"

In an easy going way

Rurero-san said that.

"Normally, I can't be sure, but I currently cannot use my arms or legs, so killing me would probably be easier than twisting a baby's hand — no, I could probably be killed even by that baby's hand. If you want to kill me, hurry up and do it. Or maybe you like torture? You don't seem like the type, but it doesn't really bother me. Do as you see fit."

".....I want to hear from you."

Making sure to not get overwhelmed by Rurero-san, I brought those words out of my mouth. As expected of one of the *Thirteen Stairs*; even in this situation, she could pressure me with her words alone.

The atmosphere made me want to run away.

In front of the rash Rurero-san, I felt the rise in difficulty compared to dealing with an ordinary and nonchalant high school girl.

But,

certainly, **normally, I couldn't be sure**.

But if it was just a contest of words —

I would make that contest itself invalid.

I would nullify it.

"Your story. I want to hear it."

".....Hah. What? I was wondering what this was about, but an invitation for betrayal, huh? How foolish. Go away."

"....."

There was no bird to get — huh.

Though it was as expected.

"Whether you — " I said. "Whether you choose to betray or not isn't for me to decide. However, what kind of conversation I have with you and whether I leave this place or not; that's my decision. You have no right to decide for me."

"Then you should just say what you want quickly." Rurero-san answered curtly. "Because, after all, I have no means to shut you up — but don't misunderstand. I may be an unknown rogue, but I at least know your logic."

"That's some impressive loyalty. I'm envious. In my nineteen years of life, I've had little to no connection with loyalty — no, but I'm sure it must feel good. To be able to trust someone unconditionally and unintentionally."

"....."

"Relying on someone must feel good, I imagine. It's just — a one-sided trust is heavy."

".....What are you trying to say? Being so suggestive."

"No, I'm just talking about my experience. Thought it might make us feel more familiar. I just wanted to say it, there was no deeper meaning to it. Neither of us can talk for long, so let's quickly dive into the main topic, shall we? Before that, aren't you thirsty? Don't you want to hydrate yourself with that feeding cup? If you want, I can — "

"Stop there. As you can see, my mouth still moves — I can at least bite you."

"Is that so. Then, do as you want."

She didn't say that lightheartedly.

I could feel an enormous amount of animosity coming my way. If I were to carelessly get close, there's no telling which part of my body would be bitten off.

"First, I want you to tell me about your power as a Puppeteer — the truth about it. I've deciphered it to some extent, but the whole thing is still vague."

"Magokoro — "

"....."

"Magokoro-chan. She's at your place, isn't she?" Rurero-san took the initiative and asked, ignoring my question. "Forcibly breaking out of our chains, the only destination she would go to is your house — "

".....Well, for now, let's say you're right." I accepted Rurero-san's words. "Yes. At the moment, I already know that Magokoro is under the constraints of Kino-san, Tokinomiya Jikoku, and you. And — I myself want to break her free of those chains. I won't ask you to betray, but how about it? Couldn't you cooperate with me on that?"

After having the initiative stolen, I struck back.

Cutting deep.

As if unexpected, I exposed myself.

".....Hah."

Faced with my all too straightforward request, Rurero-san became speechless for a moment and then laughed through her nose.

"Certainly, it's not like I don't get where you're coming from. Chains can restrain people — however, you shouldn't forget that they can also protect them. If tigers from a zoo broke free from their cages and went into town, what would happen? Of course, they would get shot down."

".....That's just sophistry."

"It doesn't only apply to our world. For example, in normal society, if the *chain* known as *the law* didn't exist, peace wouldn't be possible, would it? What's important is common sense — "

"Common sense? Those words don't fit you."

"**Don't talk as if you know anything, kid** — no, in this case, **as expected of mister fox's enemy** would be the better answer."

"You — what did you do to Magokoro?"

That day.

What I couldn't hear at Sumiyuri Academy —

what I'd wanted to hear but couldn't ask,

I asked Rurero-san.

"How trivial."

Rurero-san said.

"Don't talk to people like they're witches or monsters, *Ii-chan*. Our actions are only irrational compared to rigorous common sense — isn't that girl the true monster?"

".....I won't... deny that."

It was on an entirely different level from Professor Kyouichirou calling Kunagisa a monster. The Magokoro I saw in that gymnasium truly was deserving of that description.

It was on the same level as Kunagisa calling Aikawa-san a human.

Though it was a shame.

But,

that wasn't Magokoro's responsibility.

"But since your name is aligned with the *Cursing Names' Tokinomiya* and *Kino*, you aren't much different."

"Please don't say that. Even I don't want to work with *Cursing Names*. .....Well, if I had to say, my methods are closer to Jikoku's *techniques*, rather than Raichi's *poison*... Hey. Hey, hey, Ii-chan."

"What is it?"

"You know, I only trained Magokoro-chan and I ended up like this. And that wasn't even her full power. And in the first place, didn't you see that girl beat down Humanity's Strongest in one blow?"

"....."

"Even then, wanting to release her chains is just selfishness on your part, if you ask me. Sacrificing ninety-nine sheeps for the sake of one isn't always right. Even if it's beautiful — it's not right."

"Truthfully..... that's right. But — I can't look at it. The sight of her being restrained by other people's chains — I don't want to see it anymore. Because, ever since back then, she's always been like that. Because of that, she even died once. It should be fine to release that Magokoro now, shouldn't it? She should be able to flee from the spell known as The Orange Seed that was cast over her. Any more, and — "

I said.

"Neither you nor mister fox... You don't have the right to do as you please with Magokoro."

"Mister fox — thinking about it, he's like her true father. Though the man himself said that she was his *granddaughter* — "

"Even for parents or grandparents, there are things you can and cannot do. No matter how you think about it, it's not right."

"Those aren't words fit for Humanity's Worst." Rurero-san smiled faintly. "For example..... Or rather, hypothetically, if the stars aligned..... *Ii*-

chan. If mine, Jikoku's, and Raichi's, if our restraints were gone — could you control Magokoro?"

"I've thought about it a lot. But, setting aside whether I could control her or not, setting aside whether I could function as a scabbard for Magokoro in the state she's in now — even then, you controlling The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro; no matter how you look at it, it can't be right. If it's you guys controlling her, then I'd prefer it if no one controlled her."

".....Regardless of your personality, you're a righteous man."

"It's not like that..... I'm just saying the natural truth, which is that the one controlling Magokoro should not be you or me, but Magokoro herself."

"How idealistic. Too strong a power will invite disaster; that's an obvious fact and you know it."

I changed the subject.

It was time to change the subject.

The topic of Magokoro would come up again at the end.

"Rurero-san, what kind of past led you to join the *Thirteen Stairs*?"

"....."

Rurero-san closed her mouth and showed no intention to answer the question.

Not minding it, I continued.

"To be honest, it's not something I have much interest in. Whatever it is, it doesn't really matter. I just want to know if you wish for the end of the world, the end of the Story."

"It's the same as life — "

Rurero-san said.

" —Rather than living a long and lazy life, isn't it fine to prefer blowing up like fireworks?"

"For the people you dragged into those fireworks, it's nothing to laugh at." I said. "You shouldn't point your fireworks towards people — it's written on the warning text, isn't it? Even kids know that. You say you work behind the scenes, that the only thing you did was train Magokoro, but that's wrong. The fact that people I hold dear around me got hurt is — **all your fault**."

"....."

"Asano Miiko, Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta, Niounomiya Izumu and Rizumu, Aikawa Jun — Omokage Magokoro, and me. Oops, I shouldn't forget about Maki-san either. All of them were deeply, deeply hurt because of you. Some were left with incurable wounds, and some will never come back."

".....Unfortunately, I don't have a strong enough conscience to be moved by such cliché words. Not now. Maybe this kind of childish admonition would have had an effect ten years ago — "

But I'm already an adult.

Migishita Rurero said that.

"I know I'm the assaillant. Just living is enough to hurt other people. If so, I at least want it to be for someone's sake — I want to hurt for someone's sake."

".....For an adult, that's a very selfish opinion."

"It's the same for everyone — even yourself. Hurting people for the sake of people, being hurt by people for the sake of people; constantly, no matter the era, hurting and being hurt. It all amounts to the same. Even if there are some inconsistencies, it's just plus-minus-zero in the end. That's how the world is made — "

Back Nozzle.

Jail Alternative.

This world's laws.

"The world's been zero from the start."

"....."

"Then it's fine if it ends, isn't it?"

Hmm.....

There had been some miscalculation.

Miscalculations.

So Rurero-san wasn't simply idolizing the fox-masked man..... Of course, idolizing him was an aftereffect, but it was not the premise. It seemed that she agreed with the fox-masked man on a fair deal of the groundwork. That meant — I needed to alter my plan of attack slightly.

"I am alone."

Rurero-san said.

As expected, in a nonchalant way.

"Unlike *Tokinomiya* and *Kino*, I'm not part of a clique. I'm totally different from those *Killing Names* or *Cursing Names*; since the moment I was born, I've been alone. I was born from the crotch of wood, chewing rocks and drinking mud."

".....Rurero-san."

"The title of Puppeteer was something I acquired to live. Using and hurting people, that's how I've lived. Not for anyone else, for my sake. Just for my sake.... Can you understand how sad a life that was?"

Rurero-san was,

glaring at me with her left eye alone.

"I heard what kind of life you led from mister fox, so I know. That must have been hard. The Kunagisa Syndicate and the ER3 System. Kunagisa Tomo and Omokage Magokoro. Must have been hard... But even then — you must have moved for someone else. You must have been able to live for someone else's sake, weren't you?"

"....."

"You may have been effectively unfamiliar with loyalty, but even then, there must have still been humans around you. Around me, there have only ever been... enemies."

" —Enemies."

"Facing me — were only enemies."

Just enemies. Only enemies.

I could understand.

How sad that life had been,

I felt like I could understand it.

Rurero-san would have probably denied it, but —

certainly, around me,

there were humans.

Even then, I could understand what she felt.

That was why I could understand.

"I didn't know whether I was alive or dead — that balance, there was always a firm and uncollapsible equilibrium. But — mister fox collapsed that equilibrium. Easily and simply."

"So even if you only joined the *Thirteen Stairs* recently, it seems you've known mister fox for a long time."

"Exactly."

"I see."

"I want to exist solely for mister fox's sake. That man gave a rogue like me a reason to live. For his sake — I don't care who I hurt."

".....Even yourself?"

"Even myself."

She answered clearly.

Even with that serious injury,

she answered like so.

Without wavering.

Without budging.

"Rurero-san..... from your perspective, what kind of person is mister fox?"

"As I said — the Worst." Said Rurero-san. "There aren't many people that egotistic and optimistic. Furthermore, if they possess an personality fitting for that — "

"I heard you can turn people into puppets. Couldn't you turn mister fox into one, then?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't do that kind of thing. Him being alive is beautiful. It wouldn't make sense to stuff a wild animal."

"....."

"Rather... **I feel like I shouldn't** do that kind of thing. No, not really..... it's not even that. Whether I do it or not, it probably wouldn't make a difference."

"Well..... I get what you want to say. But — I'm scared of that man."

"Scared, huh."

"Yes. Scared — really scared. You — you guys, aren't you scared of mister fox? It's like he holds the world in the palm of his hand. He said that he was modestly being washed away by destiny, but I can only see it as him making destiny his toy. That's why... I'm scared. Does that seem off from your perspective?"

".....At the very least, I'm not afraid of mister fox at all. I feel safe being at his side."

"Safe — "

Pretty much the opposite of being scared.

Rurero-san continued with "that being said".

"There might be someone who's scared of mister fox among the *Thirteen Stairs* — "

"Who?"

"Utage Kudan."

Rurero-san said an unexpected name.

Since I thought it would have been Noise-kun, or at least Emoto-san, that was completely unexpected.

"Since that *Tokinomiya* who rules over fear, Jikoku, said so, it's probably safe to bet on it — Utage is fairly scared of mister fox."

"Utage... Kudan."

That reminds me,

Izumu-kun said.

That Utage Kudan **resembled me**.

Was that what he'd meant?

Still sticking with them, despite betraying the *Thirteen Stairs* repeatedly; someone shrouded in mystery who had yet to appear before me. However, what Rurero-san said differed from my image of Utage Kudan.

"That person, **because she's scared of him**, she either sticks to mister fox or distances herself from him, so I've heard. Though I personally can't see him like that. But, well..... it's not like I can't understand how someone would feel that way. It's what's called the curiosity of fear."

"Curiosity... of fear."

"Wanting to see something you don't understand and fear through to the end, so that you can confirm it wasn't really that scary — something like that. But in this case, **it turned out to really be scary**. There's no telling what might happen."

"So those betrayals were just ways to confirm it?"

"Jikoku talked about Utage as a *coward* — even when he said it directly to her face, she just made an unpleasant face..... If you're talking about being scared, I'm much more scared of Utage."

"Is that so?"

"Utage Kudan. Going back to the beginning, she was also a candidate to be mister fox's *enemy*... Hah. In that sense, frankly, I also find you scary. It's not like I don't think anything of you. Therefore, I understand very well why mister fox chose you as his *enemy*. With my body — I can understand it."

"If you're scared, could you stop being so malicious? I normally hate conflict. That includes violence, of course, but also verbal confrontations. I don't like them. I want to live my life without bumping into others. I'm a coward at my core."

"My loyalty towards mister fox outweighs my fear towards you."

"I guess." I nodded. "Anyway, setting me aside, first — "

And.

As I was trying to return the topic towards Magokoro —

the instant I thought about bringing the conversation back to the chains restricting Magokoro, it somehow entered my line of sight. On the other side of the window...

I shuddered.

"Eh.....?"

Without thinking, my voice leaked.

Outside of the window, from this angle, I could see the parking lot.

In that parking lot,

a car was being parked.

I remembered that car.

A two-seater white Porsche.

And, in the driver's seat.

The one steering the wheels was —

".....Saitou Takashi."

The fox-masked man.

Impossible..... Why was he here?

In an instant, I was suddenly thrown into confusion.

".....? What happened?"

From Rurero-san's position, from her posture, she couldn't see it, so she was puzzled over my expression and why I suddenly stopped talking. However, I couldn't comment on that.

Why.....?

That was bad — wasn't it?

It was bad..... no matter how you thought about it. I shouldn't have encountered the fox-masked man now. I had still only confronted three of the *Thirteen Stairs*, Rurero-san included. I couldn't meet the fox-masked man at this half-assed point.

Emoto-san was — not here.

From what I could see from the window, Emoto-san's white Benz was nowhere to be seen.

So she hadn't been found out.

Then was it just a coincidence?

A coincidence that he'd come here at this time?

Like he'd been aiming for it?

Like he'd planned for it?

Like he'd set it up?

.....Like destiny.

Like... the Story.

".....!"

In August too, I'd *encountered* the fox-masked man in this facility — but at that time, he'd only had a moderate amount of interest towards me. He didn't consider me his enemy yet.

No,

it was here that he'd chosen me as his enemy.

Then moreover, that meant.

I could not meet that man here.

Not here and now.

Not yet.

However, that being said..... What would I do?

The only entrance was the front door.

Even if there was a backdoor — given the architecture of the building, there was no way there wasn't one, but I didn't know where it could've been — while I searched for it, the fox-masked man would've entered the building.

Outside the window.

Having finished parking his car, the fox-masked man got out of his Porsche.

A fox mask, kimono and getas.

A refreshing and slender silhouette.

There was no sign of anyone being in the passenger seat.

He was alone.

He came here alone.

Just like that, without making any detour, the fox-masked walked straight towards the entrance. It was no good, I wouldn't get there in time.

I could no longer escape from the building.

I couldn't really jump from the window either..... What should I have done? Should I have hid somewhere like in the shower room?

.....I couldn't.

It was a foolish idea. Even if I hid temporarily like that, Rurero-san was here, wasn't she? There was no way the fox-masked man knew I was here — thinking under that assumption, it made sense to think that the fox-masked man came here because I met Rurero-san, or rather, because I had the objective to meet her. It might also have been Emoto-san..... Then, no matter what, if I hid in the shower room, I probably wouldn't be found by the fox-masked man — but if Rurero-san exposed me, there wouldn't be any point. Even if I jumped out the window, nothing would change.

If it was just my problem, it would've been fine.

But...

If I wasn't careful, it could've spelled trouble for Emoto-san too.

That, I needed to avoid.

"....."

I ignored Rurero-san's questioning look and searched through my bag on the floor. The bag still held the various things that I took to Sumiyuri Academy that day, in addition to the anti-lock blade. Even though the situation was different, that was the most basic precaution I could've taken. Of course, I was also wearing *Unsigned* in the holster under my jacket.

I didn't forget to bring my Jericho either.

I showed that fact to Rurero-san.

".....What? So in the end, you're finishing this with violence?" Rurero-san said with contempt. "It's fine, be my guest. But if you kill my body, that just means you weren't able to kill my spirit."

Even if my body yields, my mind won't.

Rurero-san bragged.

".....Please don't misunderstand. You're completely off the mark. I had no intention of bringing these in the first place. Even now, I don't want to use them. That's why — I want to ask for a favor."

"What? What are you sayi— "

"Please don't talk about me. You can talk about anything else."

Saying that, I nimbly, without hesitation, crawled under the bed Rurero-san lied on.

In that space, where a human could barely fit, it was cramped and hard to breathe. Since I was clinging to the floor, I could hear the sounds of the entire building.

Creak, creak.

Someone was walking.

Of course, it was the fox-masked man.

The sound of climbing the stairs.

The sound of getting closer to this room.

As expected, Rurero-san had noticed.

".....You."

"I'm aiming at you from below, but please don't make me shoot. Please, just don't talk about me."

"....."

There was no answer.

I couldn't see her eyes from where I was.
I was worried.
If it was just to get over this situation,
then this is definitely the way to go.
Just in case, I tried to warn Rurero-san once more.
But I couldn't make it in time.
The door — it opened.
Creak.
Creak — the floor creaked.
It made a sound.
"Yo — Rurero."
The first one to speak —
was the fox-masked man.
I could glean that Rurero-san gulped.
It transmitted to me.
I naturally calmed my breathing.
Calm down — there's no way he'd notice me.

Setting his existence and personality aside, he had no combat skills. Aikawa-san said it, hadn't she — there was no way he'd find a human hiding in such an unexpected place.

Even if I tried to tell myself that,
my heartbeat wouldn't stop accelerating.
No matter how much I calmed my breathing,
the sound of my beating heart might have reached him.
".....Hello. Mister fox—"
Rurero-san answered tensely.

Even in that gymnasium, Rurero-san seemed to act informally towards the fox-masked man. Thinking about it, it was my first time hearing Rurero-san and the fox-masked man talking alone. No, not just Rurero-san. Until now — I hadn't known how the fox-masked man interacted with any of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Under the bed.

From under the bed, I could only see the fox-masked man's legs. Only his kimono's trousers and his feet. But even then, I couldn't mistake him for anyone else. The fact that this was the fox-masked man — I could affirm it with my intuition.

"Hm. Though I thought I would never come here again — well, I have no choice. Ever since Kuchiha left this world, the time that had stagnated started ticking again, the predetermined harmony crumbled — no, I guess it doesn't matter now. How are you feeling, Rurero?"

".....As you can see."

Rurero-san answered the fox-masked man.

"I'm showing off my pitiful appearance."

"What about it is pitiful? Didn't you obtain those wounds for my sake? If that isn't beautiful then what is? Your current appearance is extremely sublime."

".....You sure talk big."

Rurero-san — for now, it didn't seem like she would talk about me, so I calmed down.

Rurero-san.....

"Rurero, be proud of yourself. Didn't you achieve your objective? You don't have anything to be ashamed of. The more hurt you get for my sake, the more beautiful you will become."

.....Umm.

Even though he was essentially saying the same thing as me, it somehow sounded much better from him. Is it just a matter of life experience, or maybe something inherent, I didn't know.

"I figured your wounds would have healed enough to be able to talk — though I didn't hear from Sonoki, it was my own guess. That reminds me, Sonoki isn't here. Did she go somewhere?"

"Yes — she said she had some personal business."

"'Said she had some personal business'. Hm. I don't intend to meddle with her private life, but I would be lying if I said I had no interest. I see, I see — the entrance was left open. For the terribly nervous Emoto, that sure is unexpected. Even though there's an injured person here, how careless."

"Right, exactly. While I can't move an inch myself— "

"Well, it's normal for that Doctor. Even if I worry or not, it's the same."

"You're just like usual — **even though something like that happened**."

"The incident with Magokoro, huh..... Hm."

The fox-masked man stopped talking.

It seemed he was thinking about something.

"It's been five days since then, huh..... You probably don't realize it because you were asleep, but it was quite the mess for our side. I shall explain the current situation to you."

"No..... It's fine, you don't need to explain that kind of thing." Rurero-san spoke, clearly being careful of me. "I'm not worried. Since it's you, you probably played it skilfully and dealt with the situation — just from knowing that you had the leeway to come see me, I can understand that well enough."

".....Certainly, if you say it like that, I guess it's true. That may be true. However — just having a situation to deal with was already devastating for me. Who would have thought that Magokoro would escape with such unforeseen timing."

"It's because... of me."

Rurero-san said.

"If I had enough power, she wouldn't have been able to escape just from Jikoku leaving."

"Though it's dubious whether the situation would have changed if Jikoku was there. It's like that time at the gymnasium. If you had appeared as planned, Magokoro would not have recognized my enemy. The root of the problem is you being loose with time."

".....I am truly sorry."

"I don't mind. After all, no matter what, it's all the same. Even if she didn't escape at that time, even if Magokoro didn't recognize my enemy — someday the same thing would have happened. Then the faster it happens, the better it is to prepare a counterplan. It just means that a problem was brought up to the surface."

As always, he was optimistic.

Uselessly front-facing.

"Now, I will explain the situation, Rurero."

The fox-masked man said.

As if he hadn't heard Rurero-san calling it unnecessary earlier.

What an impressively egocentric view.

Well, I was thankful for once.

I could learn how the fox-masked man viewed the situation.

The beating of my heart steadily slowed.

Calm down.

Calmly, I waited for the fox-masked man's words.

"How much did you know again? You know that Nureginu left the *Thirteen Stairs*, I think. Then,how about that — did you know that Raichi died?"

"……!"

Rurero-san — even without letting her voice out, I could feel her surprise through her abrupt movement.

It seemed she didn't know.

Emoto-san was probably keeping it a secret from her patient……. for Rurero-san's mental state.

"What, so you didn't know?"

"I heard that he was being treated at a different place."

"I see. Well, it was a shame."

"……."

Kino Raichi's death.

Against the fox-masked man, who could summarize it so matter of factly, once again, Rurero-san went silent.

I couldn't read their minds.

What could they have been thinking about?

"We lost a precious fellow. It was invaluable for *Killing Names* and *Cursing Names* to show up before people, after all. I truly think that."

"Did Raichi… suffer?"

"He probably did. Same as Izumu, his stomach burst open. I wonder what it is, maybe that Magokoro girl has some kind of trauma — it seems that she has a preference towards bursting her opponents' stomachs open."

"……."

"Don't get so depressed. It's not your fault. Besides, with Magokoro turning against us, it's already a miracle that you're alive. You should rejoice over that first."

"…….I can't think about things like that."

"Well, maybe that's how it is… it was also a mistake on my part. I underestimated Magokoro. At that gymnasium, among those four, she could only kill one of them, right? To be honest, at the time, I'd thought she would have killed all four of them. But only Niounomiya Izumu died; Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta, and Aikawa Jun all survived. And without receiving many injuries. Plus, Izumu should already have died in August, so to fulfill that purpose, he was **easier to kill**. Counting that, in the end, Magokoro didn't kill anyone with her own power."

"……."

"But that wasn't because of Magokoro's lack of strength, and neither was it because Magokoro had just woken up. Maybe it's simply because **my enemy was there**. If I had understood that — Raichi wouldn't have had to die."

The fox-masked man spoke indifferently.

"However, even then, it's unbelievable. An existence that wouldn't lose her free will, even under *Kino*'s, *Tokinomiya*'s, and more importantly, your techniques. It should normally be impossible. A nil and non-existent chance. Even my daughter, Humanity's Strongest, Aikawa Jun — if she was under you three's chains, she wouldn't be able to move an inch."

"Well, at the very least, I'm confident enough about that."

"I am certain. But if it were for that, instead of Noise, I should have gotten one more person with cursing techniques. I guess I put too much emphasis on the legend of the three arrows. No, even if I had done that, it would have been the same in the end, huh."

"Now—"

Rurero-san said, as if resolving her will.

As if keeping me in check.

A line that seemed to keep me in check.

" The Orange Seed — where is she?"

".....Hm."

The fox-masked man sighed meaningfully.

It's bad....did he notice me?

No, calm down.

The fox-masked man always sounds meaningful.

What am I doing taking everything he does seriously?

"Rurero, you must have a general idea. Because you were Magokoro's *caretaker*. Magokoro's current location is probably my enemy's stronghold, that worn out apartment. Though I have yet to confirm it, she should be there."

"You haven't confirmed..... Why is that?"

"Because there is no meaning in confirming it. I purposely didn't check. We should refrain from acting rashly. Also, this is something that I haven't said to any of the *Thirteen Stairs* yet." The fox-masked man said. "The old man Zukin passed away."

".....Zukin-san did?"

This time too, Rurero-san seemed surprised, but it wasn't enough to make her waver. Rather, she immediately asked back "What does this mean?" with some leeway.

"Zukin-san was killed? By Magokoro?"

"Don't jump to conclusions, Rurero. The old man Zukin only died because of his age. Magokoro is unrelated. Officially, it was something about his heart or his aorta, but — well, in any case it was a peaceful death."

".....I see."

"In a sense, he must have been fulfilled to be able to reach the end of his lifespan in the midst of this great war I am holding."

"When did it happen?"

"Earlier this month. Before Magokoro even escaped."

"So you kept it a secret."

"Well, yes. I wanted enough time to judge Zukin's alternative. I just replaced the fifth step directly with the old man's descendant, so to ascertain it, to judge **how she fits** in the *Thirteen Stairs*, I wanted some time."

".....His descendant..... the twelfth, was it? I heard this from Zukin-san, but isn't she just a regular high school girl, though?"

"What an honest old man. And what an amazing memory, too. You'd normally forget this kind of thing. That's right. The Twelfth Furuyari Zukin's heart, body, skill, and head are still those of a cute, developing young girl. Until now, when replacing a lost stair, I slid the steps down by one — but, well, since that girl is also *Furuyari Zukin*, I will make an exception this time."

"And? How do you judge her?"

"**Very well**."

The fox-masked man said so.

"**That girl is — the best**."

I thought I'd misheard him.

Furuyari Zukin.

Zukin-chan, the highschool girl.

Describing that girl, did he really call her the best? Naturally, the fox-masked man paid no mind to my confusion and continued his appraisal of Zukin-chan.

"I was busy with the Magokoro business, so I couldn't introduce her to the other stairs, but I will eventually show you..... Among the talents I've dug up until now, she sits within the top five. Just after Hagihara Shiogi. Having her as an *enemy* would be meaningless, but as an ally, she's the best."

".....That's quite a positive opinion."

"Yeah. Of course, she's still in the process of developing — although, that's also part of what makes her so great. At the very least, she works well enough as Furuyari Zukin's alternative for now."

The fox-masked man summarized it like that.

It didn't seem like he was joking.

.....I was so sure that Zukin-chan was chosen just to fill numbers, to complete the stairs. Just one of the fox-masked man's whims, that he made her join the *Thirteen Stairs* on one of his eccentric impulses, but — I was wrong.

Was there some meaning to it?

To an existence like hers.

To such a common girl.

An uncommon meaning.

"Did you use *Unsigned* as a bait, like with the old man?"

"Calling it bait is a bit harsh, but — well, you're right. It seems that the girl has no obsession over *Unsigned* herself, but she wants to honor the old man's will. Rare nowadays, a kid so devoted to her family. She reminds me a little of Rizumu."

"....."

"Aah, you never got the chance to meet Rizumu. Then pay no mind to what I just said. It's just trifling sentimentality."

"I will do just that. I have no interest in your sentimentality." Rurero-san said. "Then, in regards to Zukin-san's step, since it only changed from the eleventh to the twelfth, only three people effectively left the *Thirteen Stairs*: Magokoro-chan, Nureginu, and Raichi."

"No, since Noise retired, it's four people. Noise's injury was even worse than yours. Despite only being hit by a car, the one driving *was* my daughter, after all. Well, Noise's body didn't have any experience with battlefields and carnage, so it cannot be helped."

"Then..... if we remove Kajou-san, there are only eight of us left."

"That would be correct."

Though I wouldn't remove Akira.

The fox-masked man boasted about that.

In reality, since Emoto-san was cooperating with me and I had a non-aggression pact with Zukin-chan, only six were left, but from how the fox-masked man spoke, I guess he didn't know that yet; he hadn't seen through

it. Hmm. Thinking about it, perhaps just knowing that those two could move freely was helpful information.

However,

"That being said."

The fox-masked man went on.

"**Even for these eight, it's not like there is no problem**."

"Eh……?"

Rurero-san's reaction was a doubtful one.

I don't think it's possible, but had she forgotten about me sitting directly under her bed? It made me wonder about that.

"What kind of problems? When you say 'these eight', does that mean I'm included?"

"Yeah. I came here to discuss that, Migishita Rurero."

"Discuss…"

"About Magokoro."

Ignoring Rurero-san's confused reaction to those words, the fox-masked man continued at his own pace as usual, in the same way as he's always done, and aligned more words.

"Because Magokoro moved to their side — because she moved to my enemy's side, the developments that I had planned, that I had foreseen are all for naught."

"…….Sorry."

"As I said, that's fine. Don't apologize any more. It feels like you're calling me incompetent. Hm. Well, even if you were, I couldn't deny it. After all, everything was ruined."

"……."

"You could even say everything crumbled to the ground."

It would be rude to retort from under the bed, but I really wanted to do it.

"After that, I had to deal with the situation and completely stopped thinking about the fight with my enemy. Although it happened just a few days ago, I already feel nostalgic. Maybe carefreely waiting for my enemy to recover was a failure."

"……."

"Right. The problem that I have is that even though I’ve had a pause, my enemy must have been coming at me without caring."

"……I don't really understand. You — mister fox, do you think eight of the *Thirteen Stairs* aren't enough to fight *Ii-chan*?"

"It's not that. I thought this kind of thing might happen, so I subtly told my enemy to wait for my approach. However, I didn't come here to talk about that."

.....

Huh..... Was that intended to be subtle?

I feel like he just told it straight to my face.

"And... Right, Rurero. Hypothetically, what would you do? If you were alone and didn't have any weapons or techniques, to make it so that there were as few victims as possible around you — if you were trying to win, what means do you think there are?"

".....If you could do that then you would be the strongest."

"No, that's wrong. My daughter was called the strongest, but if she were to act, it would often end up with more victims than it normally would have. Rurero, the important thing is the goal of 'making it so that there are as few victims as possible around you', that part."

"You would take down the opponent's leader; in this case, you, mister fox."

"Not that either. That's wrong too."

The fox-masked man seemed to be having fun.

"Because in this case, the definition of the word *around* includes even the enemy — he is planning on making as few victims as possible, even among his enemies."

".....? There's no way..... anyone could think like that."

"There is. That's my enemy." The fox-masked man answered strongly. "It is frightening and absurd, but that man, the Nonsense User, is trying to finish this without even injuring me."

".....What are you saying? It's not like you to say that. You're definitely overestimating that — that *Ii-chan*."

"It's not that. It's not like this is just just my own personal impression. The one who for some time stuck to him and monitored his actions — the one who investigated his past and future, Yamiguchi Nureginu, said so."

"Nureginu did?"

"That's why Nureginu hurriedly left the *Thirteen Stairs*, **even making their master change their orders**. Even though they should have stayed at my side until my wish was fulfilled. Hm. Well, that being said I don't know how the person in question perceives the situation."

"The person in question, you mean *Ii-chan*?"

"Yeah. He himself might be thinking something along the lines of **I will kill him**. It doesn't matter. It's the same either way. But thinking from that viewpoint, the tactic of 'taking down the leader' is possible. However, even then — it won't go that easily."

"Yes — because we are here."

"Exactly. Then, what would you do? It's useless to put on airs. You know, I... I can generally predict what my enemy's plan is — in short, it's guerrilla warfare."

"……?"

"**He wants to make every member of *Thirteen Stairs* betray me, one by one**."

"……!"

Rurero-san's thoughts were directed towards the bottom of the bed.

It creaked that way.

Betray.

The one to say that word first was Rurero-san. But, it seems that even she didn't imagine it would include every one of them.

However.....

As expected, I guess.

Even without noticing that was the case for Emoto-san and Zukin-chan, he could guess that with his instinct alone.

"For me, someone expelled from causality, the *Thirteen Stairs* are essential to affect the Story, a lifeline. Cutting that from me is close to a starvation technique. My only option is to hold down the fort, but — there aren't many cases where that strategy has worked in the past. Hm. Perhaps he's already drawn a few people to his side. Since the day he got discharged — the same day as when Magokoro escaped from us — a good amount of time has passed."

"Impossible..... That can't be."

Rurero-san seemed like she couldn't believe it, but since I'd come here, she didn't have any basis to refute the fox-masked man.

"His final goal would be... to make even me betray. If he can manage that, I'll give him full marks. **If he can even make me betray myself**, then there's nothing left for me to say."

"....."

"Well, there is also the possibility of coming straight for me. After all, he seems quite afraid of me."

"It... seems so."

Rurero-san answered like so.

Maybe she was remembering our conversation.

"Mister fox, how..." Rurero-san then asked. "How feasible do you think that plan is, realistically?"

"Making me betray myself — if you exclude that part, well, it's not completely impossible."

The fox-masked man answered instantly to Rurero-san.

"The probability of success is around a high eighty percent, I guess."

"Eighty percent..... That much?"

"Eighty percent is by no means a high number. For a battle plan, it's on the low side. But even then, it's a number worth gambling on."

"I-I won't betray you. I'll never betray you! I swore loyalty to you. I swore to do anything to achieve your objective. And it's as you said — this body's wounds are my pride."

Rurero-san said in a protest.

"I won't betray you."

"No, you will."

Easily —

bluntly, the fox-masked man said.

"Don't underestimate the Nonsense User. Don't take him lightly. He's the one I chose as my enemy, you know. Didn't you approve of that?"

"....."

Rurero-san went silent.

I did too, although I couldn't talk anyway —

I had no words to respond to the fox-masked man with.

This situation is hard to deal with, I thought.

Really — it's hard to do.

"If, hypothetically, my enemy had contact with all of the eight steps left, the only one to not betray me would probably be Konomi. The rest would all be swallowed. Even the Miotsukushi Sisters, who hold an extreme hatred for him at the moment — because they hate him, they will be simply swallowed, without a doubt. I guarantee it."

"No matter what, that couldn't happen." Rurero-san reacted in an instant. "For that Utage girl or Jikoku, it could certainly be possible, but the Miotsukushi's Takami and Misora will never betray you. They swore loyalty to you. And... me too."

"In this case, that loyalty is a hindrance. However, well, that being said... No, talking for too long would be bad for your injuries."

"I don't mind."

"I mind. Listen, everything up till now were assumptions. My assumptions. It's up to you how you choose to think, but I will continue the conversation according to those assumptions. Okay?"

It was a pressuring way of speaking.

Even I felt stressed.

After a few seconds' pause,

".....Yes."

Rurero-san answered.

Though she seemed really disapproving.

The fox-masked man, however, seemingly without a care for it, said "Hm." —

"Migishita Rurero."

— and called her name.

"If I were my enemy, the first one I would think to approach would be you."

"....."

In that moment,

even without knowing that I was in the middle of doing that, the fox-masked man declared confidently.

"Mm. What happened? That is a weird reaction. Perhaps he has already contacted you in some way, Rurero?"

".....No."

Rurero-san refuted the fox-masked man's words.

"It's not that. It's really not."

"....."

It wasn't because she thought I was pointing my gun straight at her chest from between the bed's planks.

The words from earlier had probably worked.

No, you will — the fox-masked man's words.

Hearing that, her loyalty — it wavered slightly.

Really slightly.

But, it had certainly wavered.

Therefore, Rurero-san postponed it.

For me, I could only say that I was saved.

"Hm." The fox-masked man said. "Well, that too is the same either way. Anyway, about what my enemy will think about first: when Magokoro was in my hands, he wanted to take her back, although I wonder if 'taking back' is the right expression for it. Anyway, he would normally think about stealing her from me. However, unexpectedly for me or my enemy, Magokoro returned to him on her own. The next thing my enemy would plan to do is — to remove the chains you guys put on Magokoro."

To an astonishing degree, my movements had been read.

As if reading destiny.....

As if reading the Story.

"So, either Jikoku, Raichi or you — for now, he would try to contact those three of the *Thirteen Stairs*. If it's the same thing no matter who he goes for, then it's natural to want to catch two birds with one stone."

"That's... I guess."

"Among those three, the easiest to approach is the one who is seriously injured and cannot move, so you. From hearing out Magokoro, my enemy would naturally think that. Although it's unknown if Magokoro knows about Raichi's death and your wounds, even if she didn't remember that, he would have already seen that you were not in good form at that gymnasium."

"....."

"Now that Raichi is dead, only Sonoki can dispel his *poison*, but for Sonoki and for Jikoku — even contacting them is difficult. But if my enemy felt like it, he could find out the location of an injured person. That's why, among the *Thirteen Stairs*, you are the easiest to lead astray."

"....."

Well, in reality, I'd started by approaching Emoto-san, but that was just because I'd gotten her phone number without the fox-masked man noticing..... That's the only reason. If that wasn't the case, I would certainly have chosen Rurero-san as the first target.... Even encountering Zukin-chan was just a coincidence.....

Really scary.

As if, I was in the palm of his hand.

As if, playing with destiny.

"My enemy will contact you in the near future. And, he will first demand that you release Magokoro of her chains, then second — that you betray me."

"....."

Exactly.

From under the bed, I nodded alone.

"Of course, considering my enemy's personality, he wouldn't force you — **he will induce you to release the spell and betray me, of your own will**."

"....."

That too was right on the money.

I nodded even more deeply.

Being in the palm of his hand to this extent felt strangely gratifying.

The problem was...

What the fox-masked man would do about that.

How would he respond to my moves?

"Would I..."

Rurero-san said in a trembling voice.

"**If that's the case**..... at that time, do you think I — this puppeteer, Migishita Rurero — would act as *Ii-chan* wants me to?"

"I do."

The fox-masked man replied briefly.

"Talking eloquently, flattering and deceiving — if you stand up you are a liar, if you sit you are a swindler spouting sophistry..... what a cute guy. That man — he is even more ill-natured than I imagined him to be....."

".....You're overestimating him aga-"

"That means my overestimation was still an underestimation — hey, Rurero. No matter what you think, I am convinced that you will betray me — it's guaranteed."

".....Then what should I do?"

Rurero-san said angrily.

"While I can — want me to get rid of him?"

"Don't say such dangerous things. If that were the case, I wouldn't have bothered coming here myself." The fox-masked man said calmly. "Don't misunderstand — I didn't come here to ask for advice, and I obviously didn't come to visit you, either. I came to give you an order, Rurero."

"....."

"Migishita Rurero of the *Thirteen Stairs* — in the near future, when the Nonsense User, my enemy, appears before you — do what I instruct you to now."

".....Yes."

Rurero-san answered in a small voice.

The atmosphere was tense.

The fox-masked man ordered.

"**Betray me**."

"....."

Those words were anticlimactic.

To Rurero-san, who was as, no, even more dumbfounded than me, the fox-masked man further explained his disappointing words.

"In other words..... what I mean is this: don't do it of your own will, **betray me of my will**. If he wants you to release Magokoro's chains, then release them. If he wants you to stop cooperating with me, then at least for the coming battle, don't cooperate. If he wants you to leave the *Thirteen Stairs*, then leave."

".....B-but."

Rurero-san was obviously flustered.

Her reaction showed that she still didn't understand what was going on.

"Th-then, in the end, won't it be the same—"

"If, in the bottom of your heart, you don't lose your loyalty towards me, it's fine. Just don't resist uselessly. The more you resist — the more you go against him, the more you will be trapped in his nonsense. Keep your boundaries vague. Even with Nureginu's investigation, it's unclear how consciously he does it, but at the very least, he has always survived like that until now."

"....."

"When you are bitten by an animal, instead of forcibly pulling your hand out, push it further in — that's what this is. If you do that of your own will, your loyalty will not be lost."

"But Magokoro-chan—"

"Yeah, that's not a problem of will or feelings, but something much more realistic, so it cannot be helped — however, I don't care. As long as your will is fine."

"But... mister fox." Rurero-san faced the fox-masked man, as if she couldn't understand. "If I followed those orders... I wouldn't be able to follow mister fox's order, would I? Maybe I won't lose my will and loyalty, but— "

"That's fine."

"That's fine, you say?" Rurero-san looked astonished. "Mister fox — are you trying to say that you don't need me? That I am not necessary within the *Thirteen Stairs*? Isn't that essentially dismissing me?"

"Dismissing — setting aside whether that's appropriate or not, well, it's pretty close to that."

"Then, do I just... leave the *Thirteen Stairs*?"

"Don't jump to conclusions, listen until the end. I don't have any intent to separate myself from you. Your techniques are wonderful. To the point that *Tokinomiya*, *Kino*, and even *Miotsukushi*, *Niounomiya* or *Yamiguchi* can't compare to them. That's how I evaluate it, the power that only you hold."

"....."

Just when it's necessary, he properly flatters Rurero-san. Don't mess around, I thought. Being 'eloquent' goes for you too.

However..... It was a bother.

My heart once again sped up.

The fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi.

As expected, this would prove to be tricky.

He'd sealed my moves.

Nonsense killing.

Though, the technique was different from what Utsurigi did...

No, calm down.

That alone isn't enough yet.

With that alone, the result would still be the same.

Though the interior would be different, the result would be the same.

Even if the wills differed, it was the same.

If Rurero-san betrayed him...

"Hm."

The fox-masked man continued in his usual tone.

"That's why, even if you leave the *Thirteen Stairs*, the *Thirteen Stairs*' seventh step will always be yours. I will leave it open for eternity for you. Even if the *Thirteen Stairs* fall outside of my jurisdiction from the sweet words of that Nonsense User, as long as your will remains, come back whenever you want, Rurero."

"....."

"You can come back when the excitement cools down."

When the excitement... cools down?

I felt some discomfort in those words.

I mean, when the fox-masked man uses the word *excitement*, the meaning was always completely different from the one I normally used.

Apparently holding the same doubts,

"That's not a real dismissal,"

Rurero-san said.

"Also, if *Ii-chan*, the Nonsense User, goes for me first — if *Ii-chan* hypothetically came here and tried to make me betray you — then, if we can avoid that using mister fox's method; what are you planning to do after that? To the other *Thirteen Stairs* — what kind of orders will you give?"

"The same order."

Mister fox answered Rurero-san, who was at her wit's end.

"Except for Konomi, though. Because of the nature of Konomi's abilities, there is no need to have her betray me herself. The seven excluding Konomi, the seven including you — I will have them all betray me and follow the Nonsense User's will."

".....I can't understand your intent." In a quiet tone Rurero-san said. "If you do that, you will end up isolated."

"In exchange for that, I will not lose most of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Try to put yourself in my shoes. Noise, Nureginu, Raichi, Magokoro — oops, and even before them, Rizumu and Izumu. That Nonsense User took six of the limbs I worked hard to obtain, six steps of the stairs — I need to avoid any more losses."

".....But-"

"The Nonsense User will make the seven, aside from Konomi, betray me without a doubt. **That is already decided**. There is no avoiding it. It has already... come to that. We have to make a move before that and put the other side behind — since everything got ruined, saying that now comes too late."

That's why, the fox-masked man continued without a pause.

"If I have them betray me in this way, later reparation, later regeneration is still possible. Of course, I intend to say the same to the other six. To Sonoki and Kudan and Zukin and Jikoku and Misora and Takami. If the Nonsense User asks for your betrayal, without resisting, obey him promptly."

"But — as I said!" Rurero-san finally raised her voice. "If you do that, you will end up isolated..... Guh!"

"Hey hey, don't push yourself — you're severely injured. I still need you to act as my limb in the future."

"Th..... then! Are you saying that you have a chance of victory? Against that — that absurd Nonsense User who can make all of us betray you!? Are you saying you'll face him alone!?"

"Not alone. There is Konomi. And, Akira too."

"Even then, that's just two people!"

"No, three."

"Don't fool around! You should understand — understand just how worried I am for you!?"

"'You should understand how worried I am for you.' Hm. Worried, huh. If possible, I would like you to trust me, though."

"S-stop mess—" Rurero-san got stuck on her words from her anger. " —! You're insane! If you say that much, then do as you like! But in exchange, I don't care about what happens! Because, whether you or *Ii-chan* wins, I won't have any place to return to!"

"You don't listen to others, do you? The place you should return to is under my orders. The seventh step of *Thirteen Stairs*. Though the number may change a little."

"I mean, it's evident that *Ii-chan* will defeat you! And, even if you manage to defeat *Ii-chan* with just Konomi and Kajou Akira — at that time, the world will end! Or what, is there a sequel to the *end of the world* you talk about, the end of the Story, the Dying Epilogue!?"

"None." The fox-masked man said. "There is no continuation, and so therefore it ends. That is self-evident."

"Then what do you mean!?"

Rurero-san's words — they were like screams.

Like screams asking for help.

Stabbing my chest.

Just hearing them skewered me.

The fox-masked man, however, didn't seem to care.

Hm, he handled it like always did.

"Listen. Rurero."

"What!"

"I decided to stop fighting my enemy."

Unconsciously,

a voice of surprise was about to leak out.

I instantly sealed my mouth with my hands.

Stopped my breathing.

My heartbeat reached its crescendo.

Even though we were so far apart,

it might have reached Rurero-san,
or even the fox-masked man.
"What..... did you say?"
Rurero-san,
to the unbelievable words of the fox-masked man,
barely reacted.
"What..... did you just say? Mister fox."
"I thought you heard me. From now on, I'll stop fighting — stop fighting the Nonsense User. I will not lay a hand on him. I will cease making him my enemy."
"S-stop—" Rurero-san said in a confused tone. "Th-that simply— "
"It's not simple. Even then, it's the result of long deliberation. I actually deliberated, for once. The last few days... you see. Well, if we were to use shogi terms, I resign."
"....."
"Him taking Magokoro was the deciding move. It was our bad play. It's like our rook, lances, gold generals, and silver generals got taken all at once. No, not just them — even the knights and bishops got taken. Also half of our pawns too, that kind of situation. Hm. The early retirement of Noise, whom I'd put in the *Thirteen Stairs* to counter him, was a real miscalculation. Anyway, I already have no moves left."
"B-but—"
"Of course, it's not like I threw away my objective. I will definitely see the end of the world. And I will show it to you. As promised, I will show you how this Story known as the world will end by the hand of its creator, also known as destiny. But, I've stopped the approach of making that Nonsense User my enemy."
The fox-masked man said.
As if laughing.
"He is too much for me to handle. It seems I shouldn't have done it."
"....."
"Despite what I said to you, I was underestimating him too. That overestimation was actually an underestimation. I was underestimating his Aimless Equation."
"Aim...less? Unconscious[2]?"

[2] TL: Both "Aimless Equation" and "unconscious" are pronounced MUISHIKI.

"No, the characters — No, no, well, either is fine in the end. Anyway — around him, everything goes wrong; no one's wish ever gets fulfilled. Even though he doesn't do anything, his surroundings go crazy on their own. An equation that only exists to be absurd and nil. Facing that, feelings and wishes and requests and prayers — they don't mean anything."

".....That's absurd."

"He is such an absurd existence that he was even capable of upsetting the Story. That's precisely why he had the qualifications to accelerate the Story. It's the opposite of what I said about the twelfth Zukin, but — there is no one worse to have as an ally, and no one more interesting to have as an enemy — or so he should have been."

".....Should have been."

"Yeah. However, even I didn't think he would also be a pain as an enemy. No, I thought about it. Because he is the enemy, my enemy, of course he would be a pain. That's why I thought about it. I knew, but I couldn't understand. Right, it's as I said earlier. Even enemies are a part of his surroundings. Then, I too — I too will go crazy. My thoughts and wishes and requests and prayers, they will never be achieved."

"Will..... never...."

"Of course, I was resolved when I began that fight — I didn't think that the *Thirteen Stairs* would end up unhurt. However, according to the original synopsis, Magokoro should not have left me. But that thing, that thing that never should have happened, did in fact happen. It happened easily. Exceedingly easily. Because of the boring reason of Jikoku being coincidentally absent."

Boring... reason.

It was certainly a boring reason.

A breakthrough without any foreshadowing.

Or, contrarily irrational.

It didn't make sense.

It was absurd — the logic was absent.

"Probably, if I were to continue like this, I would lose the majority of the *Thirteen Stairs* — no, nearly its entirety. Even Konomi, though she probably wouldn't be enticed — since Magokoro ended up as the opponent's card, it wouldn't be impossible. And either way, I can't inflict any damage on the opponent with the *Space Creator* alone. I would lose all of my limbs except for Akira."

Right.
That was my way of fighting.
My currently active strategy.
Plucking his limbs, and in the end, the head.
Taking the head.
Crushing the head's objective.
"I can't have any more victims."
The fox-masked man said, as if summarizing,
and went silent.
Rurero-san was silent for a moment too,
"……So you're admitting defeat."
But she said that.
In an accusatory tone.
"Exactly. I surrender. I submit."
The fox-masked man answered lightly.
In an argumentative tone.
"If you were to only say the conclusion, I went after him only to taste defeat. I couldn't do anything."
"……."
"Then, you guys too — you don't have to do anything either. Just let it be. Sell me out. That's the only way. I was the one to ask him to use his nonsense proactively, and I was also the one to make the first move, but I didn't think it would go like this. It's not worth it. It was a complete misjudgement on my part. I chose the wrong person to be my enemy."
"But… he's your enemy."
"Yeah. I still think that. He is my enemy, my archenemy. But, I was overwhelmingly lacking in strength. I was completely careless in the initial stages. Now, I have no means to oppose him. It would be too much to call him a one-sided rival, but that is certainly the truth. Thus, I retreat."
"A temporary retreat? You retreat for now, and rechallenge *Ii-chan* when the time comes—"
"No. I will no longer lay my hands on him. I will have no relation to him. I will sever my connection to him."
"Sever… your connection."
"Even that probably wouldn't be easy, but when I think about facing him, it's a much better option. I will choose another means to see the end of the Story. I will conclude this approach."

"End—"

"How many failures does this make? I'm already bored of counting..... but I still have a continuation. I can't force myself and have everything be ruined."

".....Mister fox."

"I can't let everything be for nothing."

"Y-you don't need to rephrase."

"Luckily, there is a silver lining. As the spoils of the battle with my enemy, this time, I still have the outdated model. I was thinking about quickly returning it to my enemy, but I will use it to its fullest. The new model switched to their side, so it should be sufficient for a trade. They don't have any right to complain."

"Then, you really..."

"Yeah. As I said, Rurero. If my enemy comes here — it doesn't have to be here, but anyway, if he comes before you — no matter what he says, obey him like a slave. You can't disobey. Release Magokoro's chains, if he so desires. And no matter what happens, that will be my enemy's fault. It's not my problem."

"....."

"What about your answer? Will you not obey my order?"

"No—"

Rurero-san —

she returned a firm response to the fox-masked man.

"—Understood. Mister fox — as you wish."

"I am grateful."

The fox-masked man laughed, 'Kukukuh.'.

He seemed to be having fun.

I could only see him — as having fun.

The joy of his defeat.

Of resigning.

"Aah, one more thing, although I don't think I even have to say this — I don't want to have anything to do with my enemy anymore, so say everything that I just told you now to my enemy. That I apologize for everything up to now and that I am thankful. Well, I think the number of deaths on both sides is about equal, but it doesn't change that I was the first one to move."

"So you intend... to not meet him."

"'So you intend to not meet him.' Hm. That's what I think I just said, Rurero. I have seen a lot of humans until now, but I have never seen anyone like him outside the mirror."

"....."

"What do you think, Rurero? This is out of simple curiosity but, between me or my enemy, from your perspective — which one is worse?"

"That would be mister fox." Rurero-san answered. "No matter how I think about it, there's nobody worse than you out there. Retreating now, in this situation — nobody but you could do it."

"Hm. I wonder if you are praising me. That method is just an imitation--- not my original."

".....?"

"**Unchallenged and undefeated, and therefore the Last** — I learned that from that child. Rather than being the way of the Worst, it's the way of the Last. A last resort. For the outdated model too, if they had put that into action ten years ago, everything would have been settled—"

"From now on, what will you do?"

"Let me see. For now, I will wait on the first floor for Sonoki to come back. I need to tell this to Sonoki too. Though it would be the same if you were the one to tell her, it's a problem of sincerity, so I can't skip out on it. After Sonoki, it will be Jikoku. Afterwards, Kudan, Zukin, Misora and Takami, Hm. Misora and Takami, the Miotsukushi Sisters will be hard to deal with. Until now, I've somehow managed to keep them in check, but if I told them that, they might explode. I may need to ask for some help..... I also want to quickly fill up the few missing steps."

"N-no, not that — more like, in the future."

"I told you, didn't I? The end of the Story, the end of the Story, the end of the Story. I may have some ideas already. Using the old model to its fullest. .....Of course, at that time, I will have you be of use to me."

".....Naturally."

"I also want to come by again as a simple visit, but I will stay away from this place for a while. Because I don't want to meet my enemy, be it by coincidence or inevitability. For now, I want to completely lower the physical opportunities of contact. Mm—"

The fox-masked man suddenly stopped talking.

It seems he looked outside the window.

The parking lot, outside the window.

That means.

".....It looks like Sonoki came back. Hm. Having such a nice car openly, it irritates me..... What lousy driving. Hey hey, don't park next to my Porsche with that level of skill. In the first place, why do you go right next..... Hold on..... Wait, hey you! Bastard! What do you think you're doing!?"

He was falling apart.

It seemed that Emoto-san was quite bad at parking.

"Hm..... Good, that should do it."

It seemed that she managed to park without an incident.

The fox-masked man's legs moved.

"Then, I will go talk to Sonoki immediately — it would be a pain if she cried, so I have to be more careful about it than with you. I'm glad that you're so understanding. Then — Rurero."

"Yeah — sorry for this appearance."

"Hm—"

"Say hello to my enemy."

Then,

the fox-masked man exited the room.

He really went out.

I —

I hesitated over what I should do. I couldn't move.

I really didn't know what I should do.

I couldn't move.

Eventually, from Rurero-san,

"You can come out now."

those words came.

I obeyed.

I crawled out from under the bed.

".....Thank you very much."

Not knowing what I should say, for now, I thanked her. Rurero-san only said "Hah— " and kind of laughed through her nose.

"You don't have to thank me, I was forced to do it, after all."

"I apologize... for using such boorish methods."

"You don't have to apologize either, the gun didn't have any bullets. I knew from the start."

".....So you noticed?"

"Don't underestimate me, kid — I can guess the number of bullets inside from the shape of the gun and the way it's being held. Because I'm a professional."

"Impressive."

"How chic — far from being boorish. Possessing a gun but not putting any bullets in it."

"I was just careless, that's all. I used up all my bullets before and forgot to reload."

"Let's leave it at that."

Rurero-san said so and then went silent.

I still didn't know what I should say.

It was unexpected for the fox-masked man to say something like that. I thought that he might have noticed me under the bed and put on a show, but it seemed that was not the case.

He was serious.

He seriously gave up on me.

But..... it was ridiculous.

For that fervent fox-masked man.

For the man willing to sacrifice anything to achieve his objective, Saitou Takashi — to give up this easily on beating me. Although the fox-masked man's advantage didn't change much just from Magokoro passing to my side, even then—

Disappointingly.

Cruelly, disappointingly.

No.....

Thinking about it, I was wrong.

The fox-masked man was certainly fervent, he was monomaniacal, but only for his objective. For anything other than that, this man showed a great indifference.

Indifferent and heartless.

And, for the fox-masked man, I was nothing more than an enemy.

Just an enemy.

Not an... objective.

The fox-masked man's objective was not me.

The world's end.

The Story's... end.

There was no need to obsess over me.

August.

In the research facility of Assistant Professor Kigamine.

The fox-masked man rejoiced and was delighted.

About his meeting with me.

About his meeting with — his enemy.

That joy was probably genuine.

But,

that didn't mean anything.

That level of joy — it was something replaceable for the fox-masked man. In the end, I was nothing more than a passing point — he chose me because I was replaceable.

That's why, it didn't have to be me.

It was fine with me, but —

it would have been fine with someone else too.

But.

"As you heard—" And, Rurero-san, "Unnecessary explanations are unnecessary, so I don't need to say anything more, do I? Because you heard it directly. Encountering him in a place like this — certainly, that's impressive.... Rejoice. This battle is your victory."

"Victory..."

I still hadn't done anything.

In August, in September.

And also in October.

In the end, I hadn't done anything, had I?

I hadn't done anything concrete.

"It's called a win by default — no, not quite. It's a... resignation. That means you were better than mister fox. Though I really can't accept it myself, but if mister fox said so, it can't be wrong."

"B-but, but I-"

"I— what? Let's hear it."

".....I have to... stop mister fox. I need to stop him from achieving his goal, from ending the world—"

"Hah!"

Rurero-san,

she laughed, as if totally making fun of me.

"Spare me — spare me, please, *Ii-chan*. Mister fox said he won't lay a hand on you — nobody around you will get hurt now. Then, isn't it fine?"

"B-but—"

I was confused.

Confusion assaulted me.

My insides were stirring.

Words wouldn't... come out.

Not even an ounce of nonsense would come out.

"Don't play the good kid — the reason you moved in the first place was because someone important to you was hurt, wasn't it? Didn't you say something similar earlier? Mister fox said he won't do it anymore. You should understand it best — you no longer have any reason to be proactive."

"....."

Certainly, that was spot on.

If mister fox wasn't going to set anything up for me, if the *Thirteen Stairs* wouldn't show any reaction to my words—

I was completely out.

Completely at a stop.

What a thing..... he got me.

It wasn't nonsense killing — he'd completely stopped my moves. Since I'd already had contact with Emoto-san and Zukin-chan, I felt like it was a bit late, however, it was still in time. That was a clever move against me from the fox-masked man's side.

Who said surrender — it was like a check.

This was completely a jury tie.

Even the vagueness was avoided.

The unknown would stay unknown.

It was a terrible punch line.

Coming this far and retreating,

Saitou Takashi.

It was no joke.

".....So? Should I release Magokoro's chains, *Ii-chan*? I'll do as you say."

"That..... please do it."

At least.

I needed her to do it.

Rurero-san gigled.

"Be at ease — this is a secret for mister fox too, or rather, only Jikoku, Raichi and me know this, but — it's simple to dispel the three chains cast on Magokoro."

"Simple.....?"

"What's the date today? I'm pretty loose, so I'm neglectful in keeping track of the time. Could you tell me?"

"The fifteenth."

"The fifteenth of October?"

"Yes. I don't even have to say that much. If there's anything to add, it's a Sunday. So what is it? Do you have a TV program you want to watch?"

"Don't come at me like that, hah. Then *Ii-chan*, you just need half a month of patience."

"Half a month?"

"Even if you don't do anything, by the time we get to the first of November, my *Puppetry* and Jikoku's *Thought Manipulation* and Raichi's *Poison* — all of them will completely disappear, as if they were a dream."

".....Even if I don't do anything?"

Rurero-san's words were somewhat shocking. She continued with an "of course", while I couldn't put my next words together.

"If you bring her here, I could undo it even faster. But thinking about Magokoro's body, it's for the best to leave her be. Mine and Jikoku's *techniques*, our *skills*, affect her mind, her insides — so if she spends time without meeting us, without entering in contact with us, it'll naturally wear away. And for Raichi's *poison*, he was essentially limiting Magokoro's body with drugs, so her metabolism will return to normal."

".....That simple."

Aah...

But there was a hint.

In regards to Miiko-san's symptoms, the fox-masked man said that 'It's the sort of poison that will wear away within a week for those with strong life force—'.

That it will wear away...

I should have thought about it the same way.

Migishita Rurero.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Kino Raichi.

Just waiting was enough...

"For Kino's *Poison*, I don't know exactly what it is, so it might be best to ask the Doctor to remove it artificially, but for mine and Jikoku's chains — it's better to leave it to the person's regenerative ability."

"That method of removal — mister fox doesn't know it, right?"

If he knew, he wouldn't have talked like that.

Rurero-san nodded.

"Mister fox didn't want to hear it, so he told us not to say it. Well, since he intended to keep Magokoro captive the whole time, whether he knew the way of removal or not, it would have been the same thing — rather, not knowing it, not bothering with useless things is better."

"....."

Not bothering huh.

"Now, what'll you do?"

Rurero-san asked maliciously.

"From now on, what'll you do? *Ii-chan*."

".....For now, I can't really trust all of that. I can't deny the possibility of him wanting to deceive me so that I let my guard down."

"Though you don't think that at all."

"Although not having to take the risk of going to see every member of the *Thirteen Stairs* individually — it is, while also regrettable, certain." I said. "As mister fox said, that's what I was planning to do. That was my plan. To begin that plan, I was first trying to have you betray him. Naturally, I was trying to have you betray him of your own will."

I continued to talk while slightly lying so that she wouldn't notice for Emoto-san and Zukin-chan.

"But now that it's come to this, there's no meaning in making a strategy. Even if I pluck his limbs, he can still attach them back. Isn't it like a plastic model? Like a mobile figurine? Even if you pluck the limbs off something like that, it doesn't have any effect. And if its head isn't even turned towards me, it can't even feel it."

"That's right." Rurero-san smiled. "Even if he gets betrayed and betrayed and betrayed, our loyalty won't budge. Like a planarian." (TL : A flatworm, I don't get it)

Your nonsense will no longer work.

Rurero-san said so and closed her eyes.

As if she had won.

It was certainly my loss.

So winning or losing — that's what it is?

".....If that's the method of removal, then I have no reason to meet Tokinomiya Jikoku anymore — so I'm at a dead end. No, no it's — it's really the closure."

This is... the end?

Counting from August, the fated battle with the fox-masked man that spanned over three whole months came to an end like that.

What a let down.

Precisely because it was a let down, it was the end?

Without any climax,

without any excitement,

without any catharsis,

or mystery solving,

or catchphrases,

without any stylish action scenes, it ended.

Of course, it wasn't like everything had ended.

It wasn't the end of the world or the end of the Story.

Returning back to routine.

Just returning to the normal days.

Just returning to a peaceful world.

After that, my usual life was waiting for me.

Normally.

Too normally.

I was going back — back to the starting point.

"Just in case..... I can't let my guard down. I'll still watch over your actions. But, if it's like that, then I won't lay a hand on you either. I promise a truce. I don't want to be involved in what you guys are doing anymore. Please transmit that..... to mister fox."

I said to Rurero-san.

Like the sore loser that I am.

"This battle is — my victory."

It seemed long and short.

It seemed short and long.

Eternity and an instant.

A never ending moment.

But — it wasn’t over.
This was the end.
Kuchiha-chan.
Hime-chan.
Maki-san.
Rizumu-chan.
Izumu-kun.
Moeta-kun.
Everyone.
It seems that it’s over.
".....Ah."
Outside the window, from the parking lot.
The porsche departed.
Despite what he’d said, he didn't have as much of a hard time with Emoto-san's conversation as he had with Rurero-san. He probably just briefly told what he wanted to be told and cut the conversation short.
He went home.
The fox-masked man went somewhere.
He went somewhere.
He severed his destiny with me.
He severed his connection with me.
He declared his rupture with me.
He went off somewhere.
We wouldn't meet again.
We wouldn't ever meet again.
Whether we had a connection or not.
We wouldn't meet again.
That's what I thought.

ACT 16 - LAST NIGHT

MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA

MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI

PROFESSIONAL KILLER

0

A disordered sequence.
Arranged from left to right.

1

October in Kyoto was, to put it simply, summer.

Hot.

Oppressively hot.

But, that being said,

time passed.

Too much time passed, and little by little, it became easier to endure. The intense heat, so strong that you could faint just from walking outside, was fading away little by little.

The few doubts that were left,

with time, they too washed away and faded.

Saitou Takashi.

As he'd declared, since that day, the fox-masked man had not made any move against me. Discussing it with Emoto-san, we decided to cancel our plan to approach the *Thirteen Stairs* — to freeze it.

So, there was nothing.

Nothing.

There was nothing left.

Emoto-san,

"Umm....."

After that, I'd been worried.

"I..... from now on, what should I do?"

"What should you do, you ask—"

"Mister fox said it was fine to betray him..... but I already betrayed him. From now on..... what should I do?"

"Even if he stopped antagonizing me, mister fox hasn't lost his objective. If, like you said back then, you really, truly wish for the world not to end — you should leave the *Thirteen Stairs* of your own firm and resolved will."

".....Right."

"But, naturally — that being said, you can't really leave Rurero-san alone. Emoto-san, you should continue taking care of her, at least until she's able to walk on her own again."

"Yes. That was originally..... what I wanted to do. I am the doctor in charge of her, after all. I have to be there for Rurero-san for a few more weeks."

"Then, let's do that for a while."

".....It's not like this is a-a farewell, right?"

Emoto-san asked nervously.

"Y-you will contact me again, right? We will continue to be friendly from now on, right? W-we are friends, right? W-we will be friends forever, right? I-Ikkun."

"Of course. I still haven't treated you to the french crullers I promised."

Hearing my answer, Emoto-san smiled weakly, yet somewhat happily.

Anyway, my strategy, which should have forestalled the fox-masked man, ended up being beaten by his wit.

I couldn't do anything.

Without being able to do anything.

Only letting time pass.

Doubts fading, discomforts disappearing, tension running out — all that was left was everyday life.

Common and regular and ordinary.

What has changed? Nothing, really.

No.

Though it was gradual,

various things had been returning to normal.

Returning to normal.

First, Magokoro.

The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.

As Rurero-san said, Magokoro's sleeping time gradually shortened — she became capable of acting for a longer time.

While she still ended up falling asleep halfway through, with Hikari-san's company, with her wearing a hat and sunglasses, we went to see a movie in Shingyokyoku together.

Everything was new for Magokoro.

It was obvious — everything up to now had been strange.

It had been crazy.

Everything reflected in her eyes was new,

A lot of things became sources of amusement.

Magokoro often exclaimed,

"Woow!"

Expressing her dazzlement.

That was, for me,

an object of happiness —

and,

of sadness.

What I'd been afraid of — it was nowhere to be seen. After the three chains were released, the worry of Magokoro going out of control and becoming too violent for me to handle — proved to be baseless.

Magokoro was able to properly hold her power back.

When playing sumo in the park with the kids that came to the apartment when they saw Miiko-san, she had enough leeway to be able to lose on purpose.

If I may add something, Magokoro was popular with kids, especially girls. It seemed the reason was just that she had the stature of a kid, so they felt some familiarity.

Innocent.

Naivete.

And not just that — in perfect health.

She was like the picture of health itself.

Although the chains hadn't been completely lifted — I guess about half of them were gone, with around a half of the other half still remaining — at this rate, I didn't think there would be any problems. In the end, I decided to not ask for Emoto-san's help and let her recover naturally, even for Kino-san's *poison*, considering her rate of recovery.

"So Magokoro. What will you do now?"

I asked at a suitable time.

I informed her that the fox-masked man stopped gunning for me, and once again asked her about her future plans.

Magokoro groaned first, then said,

"I will do as you want. I don't mind anything as long as I can be besides Ii-chan, but you would be bothered if I was too clingy, right? Also, I can't stay in that bedroom forever."

"I don't really mind."

"I can't do that. I don't have any money. On top of that, my body isn't well suited to earning it. Though I do have enough stamina to sell it... Ah, right. The thing you talked about before, what was it, Wet Crow's Feather Island? The place where Hikari-san works. Maybe I should live there. If the lady there likes geniuses, I'd be sooo very loved."

"It's an isolated island, you know....."

Moreover, she'd become insanely loved.

It would be a lovey dovey state.

One close to tragedy.

"Then should I live around here? Taking a job requiring stamina..... Mmm. But wait, do I even have a family register?"

"You should have one, I think? Though I don't really know. Well, I'll find out for you. If you don't have it, we can just make one."

"And Ii-chan?"

"Mm?"

"Ii-chan, what do you want me to do?"

"If possible, I would like to stay at your side, I guess. It would certainly be a pain if you were too clingy, but since you're alive, I want to hang out with you again."

"Hehehe."

"Well, it won't go exactly like before for either of us, but — let's do as we see fit."

"Right."

—And.

After having talked this much, Magokoro reached her limit for the day and fell asleep, so the conversation reached an end.

Well, we'll deal with all that later.

For now, let's wait for her complete recovery.

That was the current conclusion.

Speaking of recovery,

Miiko-san and Houko-chan.

As you would expect, these two weren't ordinary.

The twentieth of October.

Five days after the fox-masked man’s resignation.

The two of them were discharged.

"We made you worry."

".....Sorry."

Miiko-san was aloof.

Houko-chan was a little awkward.

That reminded me, in the end, I hadn't visited Houko-chan again since then. When I apologized about that, ".....I didn't really want people to see me in a hospital bed anyway." Houko-chan said, even more awkwardly.

"Miiko-san."

"What?"

"Ah, no. Well, thanks for what you always do."

"Mm."

Miiko-san nodded generously.

She acted as if nothing had happened.

I could feel her style.

"Hospitals have an interesting odor."

"Yeah....."

"No wonder you spend a lot of time there."

"No, it's not like I stay there because I want to....."

"I don't ever want to."

She wasn’t the type of person that let it appear on her face, but Miiko-san was fed up with hospitals from the bottom of her heart. Though it was just a groundless guess, Rabumi-san had probably played a big role in that. She had too much influence over the Story for such a small role.

"Now, I need to start training tomorrow. I’ll train my body, which has become as dull as an old boat, once more."

She already had enough motivation.

That being said, neither of them had completely recovered.

Though it's obvious.

It seemed that Miiko-san was already pushing herself, and as for Houko-chan — ever since then, she’s occasionally had flashbacks to that experience, leading to panic attacks.

Miiko-san's problem was physiological, so we can set it aside, but it's a mystery how Houko-chan was discharged in a state like that. At a later date, when I sneakily went to ask about it at the hospital,

"Rabumi-onee-sama! I miss my home very much! If I stay at the hospital any longer, I'll go crazy! If you let me be discharged, I will be in your debt for the rest of my life, so please!"

Something like that had apparently happened.

.....

Let's just pretend I didn't hear anything.

Anyway, the two came back to the apartment.

And by doing so, naturally,

"....."

"....."

"Mm? Who are you?"

They met Magokoro.

It was the first time for Miiko-san, but the problem was Houko-chan.

To be frank, there was a quarrel.

A quarrel involving the whole apartment.

However, even Houko-chan could understand that the one who killed Moeta-kun was Nureginu-san, and she was a girl who followed logic.

In the end, they broke the ice.

Magokoro was also a victim and a sacrifice.

There was no explanation needed about that, and for Houko-chan, Magokoro's way of life seemed to overlap with her own.

"If Onii-chan says so."

"It doesn't matter what I say, Houko-chan, decide with your own will. Aah, that's an order from your master, so obey."

"....."

So.

Magokoro and Houko-chan shook hands.

Magokoro took a liking to Houko-chan.

It seemed she didn't remember having kicked her.

Setting aside the genuineness of that memory, since I'd witnessed that moment, it was settled by Houko-chan dealing a high kick to Magokoro.

Anyhow, now, everyone was back.

The ones still alive.

Except the ones who'd died.

Except Moeta-kun.

"Nonsense User onii-chan."

"Yes?"

"If you'll allow me to be frank, I am a little lonely."

Since she'd said it so frankly there was nothing I could do. Thus, Houko-chan began to live in my room.

Me and Hikari-san and Houko-chan.

Three people living in a four tatami room was a tough situation.

I'll say it as many times as I need to, but October in Kyoto is summer.

If it was winter, we'd just have to huddle our bodies together, but in this mesothermal temperature, there was nothing we could do.

Even then, it was still hot.

There was still warmth.

But.

Five days later,

"I've caused you plenty of trouble."

On the twenty-fifth of October.

Chiga Hikari.

Hikari-san — returned to the island.

To Wet Crow's Feather Island, to the side of her master.

"A lot happened, so I extended my stay for quite a long time, but I can't possibly be absent from the island for much longer. Leaving the lady to Akari, Teruko and Rei-san... isn't advisable."

".....Is that so."

Though it was a shame, there's nothing we could do.

There was no longer any reason to stop her.

Now that we didn't have the threat of the fox-masked man.

There was no reason for me to bind her to this place.

I couldn't wish for her to stay here.

"We, too, only caused you trouble. Really, no matter how many times I thank you, it wouldn't be enough."

"Please stop — being useful to the one we serve is our only joy."

"But, please, let me thank you."

I thanked her.

Many times.

Many times.

Again, many times.

I repeated it for each time she took care of us.

Magokoro, who had become quite friendly with Hikari-san, however, didn't seem to be that sad when parting ways with her.

"I guess we'll meet again."

She said.

She was already thinking about the future.

That's typical of Magokoro, I thought.

Hikari-san wholeheartedly answered "Yes!".

"You can come over to the island at any time. I am sure that lady will welcome you with open arms, Magokoro-san. Of course, you too."

She looked at me mischievously.

Aah, that reminded me, that's what she came for to begin with.

A trial period.

That was certainly an appealing proposition.

"Give my greetings to Iria-san, Rei-san, Akari-san and Teruko-san, and also Kasugai-san, and..... errr, that cook too."

"Yes, of course."

Then,

Hikari-san,

softly approached me,

"Goodbye, my own master."

And didn't say anything like that. But well, after some normal parting words, we saw Hikari-san off.

She'd become a resident of the rundown apartment before we knew it, so we felt like something was missing for the next few days. There was an empty hole left.

Chiga Hikari.

Or maybe, Chiga Teruko.

It had all ended while still vague.

I thought that was for the best.

Let's go to that island again someday.

This time, I clearly decided that.

I also wanted... to see Kasugai-san.

.....Then I needed to hurry. Who knew where that frivolous vagabond might have gone next.....

And, well.

The room was a little more spacious.

A little, no, a lot more spacious.

"Onii-chan, do you like that kind of outfit?"

"Eh? No, not really."

"Since Moeta, who complained about everything I wore, isn't here anymore, as someone serving Onii-chan, I could dress up like that from now on."

"Mm."

"What happened?"

"Houko-chan."

"What is it?"

"You're ten years too early."

"....."

After exchanging this kind of conversation.

Three more days passed.

The twenty-eighth of October.

Kunagisa Tomo's return to the syndicate had become official.

I got that report on the phone.

"Once again, I don't really know what to say in this situation. I guess I should congratulate you."

"Uni. Well, it's not a bad thing."

"What's the schedule now?"

"Errr, at the end of next month, there's a sort of ceremony. To put it plainly, it's to show my face, or something like thaaaat. Work will begin for real at the start of next month."

"Hmm."

"The sorting out, or well, the preparations are also done. Now I just have to wait for it all to start again, like a sprinter in position, I guess. I'm a bit excited."

"I see. Well, we both have something to celebrate. Then, let's see, yeah, I'll come to congratulate you soon."

"Today? Tomorrow?"

"Don't rush it. I can't come by so soon. There's something called preparation. Including me preparing my heart. Also, your old teammates are in your building, right?"

"Yes. Not everyone, but five of them came. It's peaceful, kind of like an alumni meeting."

"I would feel bad going in there."

"Unii. Even though Ii-chan was the one who told me to call them."

Kunagisa said, dissatisfied.

But even I really wanted to rush right over to her. However, I still had to prepare.

Because I went so far as to propose to her.

I wanted it to be a little romantic.

I thought.

Though it may have been idiotic.

"Idiot."

The phone call got cut and Miiko-san was behind me.

She was inside the room without having knocked.

In jinbei.

"There's an idiot here."

"....."

"How peaceful."

".....Yes, it's peaceful."

"So peaceful it feels out of place."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It's a good thing. Without a doubt." Miiko-san said. "What do you intend to do now?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do you really want to let it end like that?"

Miiko-san was serious.

Though she was inexpressive, so I couldn't really tell, she seemed serious.

As usual, even though I still hadn't told her anything. I guess a swordswoman could tell that much.

It was hard to give an answer.

"Since the other side retreated it would be difficult for me. It was self-defense in the first place. From the beginning, it's just been self-defense. I was just lighting some sparks. If the other side won't do anything, then it would just be revenge."

"I heard that avenging your friends is the best way to appease your heart."

"I don't have that mentality."

I don't.

The current me doesn't.

"Looks like it."

Miiko-san opened her iron fan with a bang.

"Anyhow, peace is the best."
"……I guess."
"Anyhow, invite me to the wedding."
That line was a sneak attack.
It seemed she’d been standing me for a long time.
"……."
"……."
Uwaah, it was so awkward.
Even though I was the one who got rejected…….
Just because I couldn't give up.
"There's no need to make a face like that, Inoji."
"……No, but."
"But I’ll be a bit lonely, I guess."
"……."
"I’ll be a bit hurt, I guess."
Miiko-san said.
"I feel like hitting you with a shinai."
"……."
Scary…….
"No, um, Miiko-san……"
"So? Do you think you can become happy?"
"…….I don't know. But—"
I answered.
"It would be good if I could."
"A good line."
"That's the line of a man who fell in love with you."
"That's why you say such good things."
"I still like you, even now."
"I thought that might be the case."
Miiko-san smiled lightly enough that I wouldn't notice,
turned her back to me,
and left my room.
"……Tch."
Anyway, at that moment.
The romantic feelings that I’d been holding for Miiko-san,
what resembled a first love,
without anyone knowing,

Quietly — they came to an end.

"Onii-chan is such a womanizer."

Houko-chan said so from behind the ceiling.

.....Why is she behind the ceiling?

I thought.

"Ah, you connected this room to the one upstairs by removing the floor, didn't you?"

"Nin nin."

"So you really were a ninja....."

Her weird character building was confirmed.

The poor girl.

Koutoumaru-san trained his muscles as usual, still invested in his christian hobby, quarreling with Miiko-san. Nanananami sometimes went to university.

The twenty-ninth of October.

I went on a date with Sasaki-san.

The thirtieth of October.

I went on a date with Kazuhito-san.

And,

The thirty-first of October.

The end of October.

Nine in the afternoon.

I went to the Kyoto Imperial Garden.

Where I'd met Emoto-san thrice.

However,

this time, it was not to meet Emoto-san.

Furuyari Zukin.

To complete my promise with Zukin-chan.

To give her *Unsigned* — the small knife that *she* wanted so much, to the point of joining the *Thirteen Stairs* and obeying the fox-masked man.

In exchange, Zukin-chan would tell me the details of that knife, why the previous Furuyari Zukin wanted it so much — to be honest, at this point, I didn't really care.

The fox-masked man should have told Zukin-chan the same thing as he'd told Rurero-san. Then the exchange, the promise, the non-aggression pact didn't mean anything.

I no longer had any reason to be wary of her.

I had no reason to be afraid of a possible trap.

For now, I took out the knife from the holster under my jacket, practiced a few swings and put it back.

That kind of thing — I should just give it away.

It wasn't something important to me.

You could even call it worthless. For me, a knife that cut too well wasn't easy to use. Whether that reason made sense or not, even if Zukin-chan wanted to sell that knife for money, I didn't care either way.

She should do as she wants.

I thought that.

That's what I was thinking, but —

".....What's this?"

I felt a slight attachment.

No, is attachment the correct word?

No, rather — something lacking, I guess.

In front of the Kenreimon,

on the bench from where you could see the aphananthe tree, I sighed.

Half a month.

Since then, nothing happened.

Fifteen days of ordinary life went by.

There was nothing.

Just time passing.

Now that it came to this, no matter what, no matter who, anyone would have to admit it.

The fox-masked man,

Saitou Takashi had really stopped fighting me.

He'd ceased making me his opponent.

"That kind of sportsmanship was unexpected."

However,

it was also true that he was good at giving up.

I suddenly remembered something I'd learned at university.

The recently trending crime, stalking, was mainly born from romantic feelings and a monomaniacal mind, but it’s common for those actions to calm down and, in most cases, suddenly stop one day without any warning.

Essentially, it means that their goal changes.

Like getting bored of a game.

Like getting bored of a novel.

A girls' heart and the clear autumn sky.

Though it wasn't something as sentimental.

That party.

That party at Sumiyuri Academy was the end.

Magokoro's escape was a lethal blow, huh.

Bad move.

And resignation,

that man, in the end,

hadn't named himself in front of me.

He hadn't revealed his name as Saitou Takashi.

In the end, you could sum it all up as the fox-masked man wrestling on his own. I’d done close to nothing. I just reacted to his actions. Even what I did had pretty much no meaning.

All that was left was emptiness.

".....And."

Unsigned.

Today, after I give this knife to Zukin-chan, everything will end.

The fox-masked man,

the *Thirteen Stairs*,

the connections will be severed.

We will no longer have any relation.

Naturally, it's not like everything will disappear.

Just like how there exist incurable wounds,

There also exist unforgettable memories.

Also,

I wonder if that was for the best.

They exist for sure.

The fox-masked man, Humanity's Worst, who desires to end everything. Letting him go — pretending not to see anything despite knowing so much — could that be forgiven?

Rurero-san laughed through her nose.

Exactly.

I can only say that was on point.

I wasn’t an ally of justice.

Fighting for world peace was not something I could do.

As long as today and tomorrow are peaceful, as long as my surroundings are quiet, I was a cheap man who would be satisfied just by that.

I was small-minded.

Not the Strongest, not even the Worst.

Far from the Last.

Nothing.

Just a Nonsense User.

If the clear autumn sky stops raining,

I cannot move.

But even then, something was bothering me.

What would the fox-masked man do, what means would he use, with which method would he try to welcome the *end of the world*, how would he see the *end of the Story*, and the *Thirteen Stairs* that I wasn't able to meet in the end — what would happen to them?

I had worries.

Too many to count them all.

But none of that concerned me now.

It didn't concern me now.

And even if it did, I wasn’t interested.

"……It's nonsense."

Aah, but — just one thing.

Someone that couldn’t be satisfied with being unconcerned.

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

A lot of things had been steadily recovering from being involved with the Worst — returning to everyday life.

But Aikawa-san never came back.

Aikawa-san never returned.

Ever since that day — when the fox-masked man took her.

I didn't think that she was concerned about being defeated in one blow by Magokoro. She wasn’t like that. She wasn’t the kind of person to get excited by something like a knight-errant.

But she hadn’t come back.

Kouta-san's investigation was fruitless too.

I didn't have any leads.

My daughter.

Outdated.

The fox-masked man — he said that he would **use** Aikawa-san for his next stage, then Aikawa-san was without a doubt still in the fox-masked man's hands.

I wonder what he would do.

Would he restrain her — like Magokoro?

Her stamina.

And body.

And consciousness.

Would he limit them?

No, that probably wasn't the case..... That man, the fox-masked man — he wasn't the type to repeat his mistakes over and over. If nothing else, he never repeated the same thing, be it a failure or a success. He put chains on Magokoro because he learned from the incident with Aikawa-san, but I couldn't imagine he'd use those same means on Aikawa-san. Even his defeat against me, he would only think of it as fuel for his next step.

Then, I wonder what he would do.

Using Aikawa-san.

Key.

Would he remove the lock.....?

"Contractor... right....."

Certainly, as a limb — the strongest one in the world, bearing the title of Alternative (Contractor), Aikawa Jun would be the best possible choice for Saitou Takashi. Even as an old model, Aikawa Jun would be easier to use for him than Omokage Magokoro.

Then the fox-masked man probably wanted to give Aikawa-san one of the spots of the *Thirteen Stairs* that went vacant after his battle with me. However, even if that was the case, I don't think Aikawa-san would accept it. I wonder what the fox-masked man would do about that—

No, I don't know.

Thinking about it, in that gymnasium, Aikawa-san's full attention was on Magokoro — she hadn't even noticed her father's existence.

Father.

Among Saitou Takashi, Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya —

the only one she'd called her father was Saitou Takashi.

Despite saying how much she hated him and that she would kill him for sure next time — I guess someone like me couldn't understand Aikawa-san's heart.

If there was anything I had to be worried about.

If there was any concern I had to have.

It would be about Aikawa-san,

if you asked me whether or not I was curious, whether or not I wanted to know,

If you forced my hand —

".....No, you don't have to go as far as forcing my hand."

At any rate.

There was nothing I could do now.

Hikari-san had also been feeling down about the fact that Aikawa-san didn't come back, but in the end, that person, that existence is on an entirely different level than us. Being worried about her is just arrogance.

It's already over.

Everything is over.

I repeated those words once more, words that I'd recited to myself like a charm this past half-month, and reiterated that.

It's over.

With the minimum amount of victims.

As if nothing had happened.

It really..... ended...

".....However."

Zukin-chan — she was late.

The meeting should have been at nine in the afternoon.

I didn't think that this laid back blacksmith highschool girl would do something as paranoid as arriving one hour early like Emoto-san, but looking at my watch, it was already over a quarter past nine. Was Zukin-chan loose on time like Rurero-san? Having your socks loose should be enough; thinking that, I looked around the dark Imperial Garden, stood up from the bench and focused my eyes to take in my surroundings. As expected, unlike at noon or in the morning, there weren't many people. If there was someone nearby, I would notice immediately.

Did she forget our promise?

No, after saying that much....

I was beaten. I didn't know how to contact that girl..... She was a modern highschool girl, so she must have had a cellphone. I should have asked —

"*Ii-chan*."

"*Ii-chan*."

Being called,

turning to the direction of the voice, thinking it was Zukin-chan.

Thinking that she didn't have to say it twice.

You're late — as I was about to complain.

I turned back.

When I turned back, certainly there was Zukin-chan.

But just half.

Just her top half.

Her organs were sloppily hanging out.

Blood was scattering profusely.

Blood was dripping off.

Slumpily looking down.

Without any chance of life left in her.

Her living functions had clearly stopped...

"……!"

Her arms —

her arms were that of a fragile girl.

On both sides.

On one side each,

on both sides,

from both sides,

as if doing a banzai pose,

she was held,

she was supported,

about ten centimeters off the ground,

like a specimen,

as if showing her,

she was hanging down.

She was hanging.... down.

"Wh.....wh-wha!? Zu-Zukin—"

"Ninth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Misora, appearing."
The girl on the right said.
"Eighth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Takami, appearing."
The girl on the left said.

Swoop.
The two of them threw Zukin-chan.
They threw her towards me.
Violently.
Inhumanly.
Ferociously.
As if,
denying the end.
As if saying that it would not end.

2

Grandpa, you see — Zukin-chan said.

"He didn't really want me to follow in his footsteps."

"Really?"

When I asked back, Zukin-chan affirmed with a "Yes.".

"I guess he didn't want me to get in too deep. Saying it was a world for men. I only ever did it by imitating. In the end, grandpa, up till his death, taught me nearly nothing."

"But you inherited the title of the twelfth, right?"

"Officially, yes. I can't let the name of Furuyari Zukin disappear that easily. But it seems that grandpa wanted to rely more on my kids."

"So you have kids."

"Who does!"

A common retort.

When you're so used to it, getting a surprisingly normal retort instead of a weird and warped one wasn't so bad.

Anyway, she certainly was lively.

Like she was overflowing with energy.

"Well, in the first place, grandpa had mom late in his life. He was unlucky to not be able to see his great grandkids at ninety-eight, but I'm just sixteen."

"A first year?"

"Nah, second year."

"Having both school and learning blacksmithing. Must be hard."

"Not really. It's fun. I guess it's because I like grandpa — no matter how against it grandpa was, I'll show him show him show him that I can become a great blacksmith too."

"You don't need to show him three times."

What kind of service mentality is that?

Fuumu, I crossed my arms.

"What are you going to do from now on? Now that your grandfather's passed away."

"Mm. I'm being taught by a blacksmith acquaintance of grandpa. There are limits to learning alone, after all."

"Do you like blades?"

"If you put it like that, it sounds dangerous. Hmm, I wonder. I'm not really sure. If you asked me whether I like them or not, I guess I'd say yes, but it's not like I like them that much either. I think they're pretty, but the thought of them being dangerous is stronger. Mm, right, I guess, how should I say it, I don't really know."

"You don't know?" I tilted my neck to her answer. "I really thought you'd be into them."

"Is that so."

"It is."

"That's not the case."

"That must be the case. Don't say absurd things. In the first place, if you didn't like them at all, you wouldn't be able to do it, would you? It must be tough being a blacksmith."

"That's why — I told you. What I love is grandpa."

Zukin-chan said with a bright smile.

It was really bright.

Without an ounce of doubt or worry.

"It was something that grandpa loved enough to do for his entire life, so I want to like it too— "

Zukin-chan said that.

Said that.

Just said that.

The conversation ended here.

Oops, I talked too much. We'll continue this when you give me *Unsigned* — and.

With that —

with that, it was over.

But.

Though it was over, it wasn't the end.

It ended, but it wasn't the end.

"No—"

"No—"

The Miotsukushi Sisters said in turns.

"Since *Nureginu the Concealed* left, I may become the eighth step."

"Since *Nureginu the Concealed* left, I may become the ninth step."

"Oops, since we just dealt with the traitorous fifth step, I will become the seventh step."

"Oops, since we just dealt with the traitor fifth step, I will become the eighth step."

"I need to make sure to not be wrong."

"I need to make sure to not be wrong."

Like howling —

with the same moves on both sides,

in symmetry,

the girls — they existed before me.

Priest robes.

Priest robes that seem to mix with the darkness.

Inside the Imperial Garden, they didn't feel out of place.

Far from that, it was as if this place,

as if this garden,

was a stage for them.

"Zukin-chan..."

Being thrown.

Seeing Zukin-chan being thrown away like garbage, I couldn't do anything and just looked at her below me. Groveling on the floor, like a youkai without a lower body...

As if clouded,

as if lost...

Her corpse.

Her neck was pointing in the wrong direction,

her expression reflected in my eyes.

Nothing reflected in her eyes.

Hollow.

Warped in pain... and hollow.

Dead.

Dead beyond anyone's control.

Even expressing it like that wasn't accurate.

This was already... an object.

There was no longer any human dignity.

No dignity.

That kind of thing — it was trampled over.

Was violated.

"Y-you are—"

I,

looking back and forth at Zukin-chan and the Miotsukushi Sisters — I was barely able to pronounce those words.

"You girls did it?"

"Foolish question."

"Foolish question."

The sisters answered in turns.

"We dealt with the traitor."

"We dealt with the traitor."

"This thing."

"This thing."

"Despite being in the *Thirteen Stairs*, it interacted with the enemy."

"Despite being in the *Thirteen Stairs*, it interacted with the enemy."

Death to the traitors.

The sisters said just those final words in unison.

"....."

Wh-what.....?

Hold on, don't be confused.

You should be calm in these situations.

However, even if I understood this logically, since almost all my doubts, worries or attachments over the situation had faded, I couldn't deal with this abrupt and rapid development.

I couldn't deal with it.

All I could understand was that my breathing was rough.

Zukin-chan.

Looking closely,

my eyes had been too focused on the fact that she had no lower body, so I overlooked it, but — on her arms and face, there were small cuts, an uncountable amount of wounds.

Scars, as if she had been tortured.

The scars of someone who was tortured.

Cruel.

I couldn't... look.

Traitor.
Traitor.
Because... she interacted with me?
That day — because she met me by chance?
Just because of that?
"Mi-mister fox—"
I said.
Glaring as harshly as I could at the Miotsukushi Sisters.
".....I thought he wouldn't lay a hand on me."
"Fuh—", Misora-chan.
"Fuh—", Takami-chan.
They laughed in the same way.
They laughed, making a fool out of me from the bottom of their hearts.
Distorting her face repulsively.
Distorting her face repulsively.
Misora-chan smiled.
Takami-chan smiled.
The Miotsukushi Sisters — they smiled.
"**That doesn't matter**."
"**That doesn't matter**."
"I."
"I."
Misora-chan,
and Takami-chan said, in a literal chorus.
"**I can't go back if I don't kill you — as long as I don't kill you, I can't face mister fox**."
"**I can't go back if I don't kill you — as long as I don't kill you, I can't face mister fox**."
".....!"
The fox-masked man...
That bastard, so he'd failed to persuade them!
There's a limit to how little authority he can have...
At least deal with your defeat!
Why would a bird foul its own nest!?
Briefly, I looked around us.
It was no good. It wasn't a situation where I could expect any help.
I hadn't told anyone that I'd be coming here.

I didn't want to make Houko-chan and Miiko-san worry, and even before that, I'd completely let my guard down.

I wasn't expecting an unforeseen situation.

Even though, until I gave *Unsigned* to Zukin-chan —

it still wasn't over.

My concentration dropped.

I was careless.

It was clearly... my mistake.

Because of that mistake,

Zukin-chan,

who originally shouldn't have died —

".....Why?"

Confused and in awe as I was,

I couldn't refrain from asking.

"Why did you..... why Zukin-chan? She didn't betray you guys — she still hasn't done anything."

Right — she hadn't done anything.

Sixteen years old.

Too young.

She didn't do anything... did she?

She was a common schoolgirl.

Normal.

Too normal.

To the point that becoming happy should have been a given.

She... was normal.

"She interacted with you — with just that, a sin is a sin."

"She interacted with you — with just that, a sin is a sin."

"Serving the interests of the enemy is a big sin."

"Serving the interests of the enemy is a big sin."

"Sins should be paid for with your life."

"Sins should be paid for with your life."

Death to the traitors.

Overlapping.

Their words overlapped.

Resolutely and blurrily.

The horizon was zigzagging.

I was bewitched.

It was like my vision had been sliced in half,

by the Miotsukushi Sisters' existence.

Izumu-kun, Niounomiya Izumu — he said that he'd defeated them easily, but they're absurd. That was just because Izumu-kun was overwhelmingly strong.

Their mere presence exuded a kind of pressure.

Like a rat stared at by a snake, my body froze.

"....."

Shit.....

To be honest, I'd been underestimating them.

I gulped.

The fox-masked man estimated a success rate of eighty percent.

That I would be able to persuade everyone in the *Thirteen Stairs* except for Kajou Akira and Ichirizuka Konomi.

But..... they're no joke.

There's no will.

There's no loyalty.

There's only... fanaticism.

.....Izumu-kun had been highly displeased that Misora-chan and Takami-chan were chosen to replace him and Rizumu-chan in the *Thirteen Stairs*, but I was convinced.

This wasn't just about their abilities as *professional killers*.

These girls —

these girls were abnormal.

Certainly, Zukin-chan got in contact with me before receiving orders from the fox-masked man and exchanged a promise, but that was all. There was no need to kill her.

Where was the necessity to kill them?

This cruelly?

This ghastly?

This wasn't a purge.

It was just massacre, wasn't it?

Shit.....

I wonder if Emoto-san's fine.....

Depending on how they think, Rurero-san might be a target too.....

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

These two — they might do it.

Fanatics, fanatics, these Miotsukushi Sisters with their self-righteous faith in the fox-masked man — even Noise-kun who retired and Nureginu-san who resigned. At worst, those two might be considered traitors too.

Furthermore,

though she was not officially in the *Thirteen Stairs*,

Magokoro too.

No, Magokoro..... The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.....

If it was her — if it was Magokoro, who easily beat Izumu-kun and Aikawa-san, Misora-chan and Takami-chan weren't a threat to her — and unlike that time, the current Magokoro was almost totally free of her chains.

Should I have brought her with me?

.....No.

That wasn't the case.

I'd properly decided, didn't I?

That I would not use her.

That I trusted her,

and wouldn't use her.

I decided that I would protect her.

Without being shy towards Magokoro.

"Now, let's ring the bell and polish the sickle."

"Now, let's ring the bell and polish the sickle."

"Nonsense User," Misora-chan.

"Nonsense User," Takami-chan.

Please serve us with your life.

To those voices in unison,

I —

"As if I could do that!"

I fled with all my force.

With a full sprint, I ran away.

That meant abandoning Zukin-chan's body...

No, I shouldn't worry about that.

That was... already a corpse.

Just a physical object.

Don't be engulfed.

Don't be swallowed.

Anyway, more importantly, in this situation..... how could I survive? How could I dodge their attack? I just thought I'd be meeting Zukin-chan, so I had no weapons, not even the Jericho without any bullets — all I had was the *Unsigned* under my jacket, but I couldn't take these two on with such a small knife.

If they are one and the same... no, even if they are multiple people, I should search for a gap in their teamwork, if there is any. In that sense, even without the factor of them being fanatical, the Miotsukushi Sisters were painful for me.

I looked behind me while running.

Misora-chan,

and Takami-chan,

were following after me silently, expressionless.

To be exact, they kept,

a certain distance from me.

.....A certain distance?

Why won't they catch up to me?

That priest robe might not be fit for running, but, even then, the professional Miotsukushi Sisters should be able to close the distance with an amateur like me immediately. Even then, why...

I see.

They are trying to make me run a long distance and exhaust me.

To kill me easily.

Like hunting.

Too one-sidedly. It's not even a battle.

Not even tag, not even hide and seek.

Predators and prey.

Being eaten... cannibal?

"—Tch."

Me, who couldn't be eaten by Izumu-kun — even though I couldn't even be killed by Izumu-kun.

I won't let it go — like that.

A counterplan.

I need a counterplan.

".....Shit, if I remember correctly—"

If I remember correctly, in this Imperial Garden...

I slowed down my pace a little.

Just enough to not be noticed.
And confirmed my surroundings.
This is bad.
I was running in the wrong direction.
I was running straight south, which was the opposite direction.
When I was able to see the Demizu square,
I abruptly turned ninety degrees.
No, I had too much momentum, so the angle ended up a bit acute.
I somehow held up my body, which was about to fall over,
and accelerated.
I stopping my breathing,
ten seconds,
Just for ten seconds —
faster than at full strength,
with a speed surpassing that of my full strength — I rushed.
Like an arrow that had been shot, I rushed.
Not going west, not going south, the Miotsukushi Sisters were dumbfounded by my lack of an attempt to exit the Imperial Garden. However,
obviously, I couldn’t lose them that easily.
Maintaining the exact fixed distance —
from the right and the left,
they came after me.
The pressure was tough.
Ten seconds weren't enough at all.
Izumu-kun had said some absurd things again.
In the first place, I was bad at sprinting.
Gugh……
It's no good, huh? Ten seconds……. is too much?
Distance.
The distance was…
……And.
When I became negligent with my footsteps, I tripped up.
I was about to fall forward.
I somehow managed to hold on,
however, that small mistake would not be overlooked.
"Kasa—"
"—Maji."

By the time I stood up, they'd already caught up.
The palm of Misora-chan's left hand.
The palm of Takami-chan's right hand.
Formed a cross on my back.
And.
"Kawaochi--"
"--------Kyouiki."
I was sent flying.
Without any time to think about aiki,
I flew in the air,
rolled on the ground,
and was blasted near the wall I could see before me.
Hitting my head strongly on the ditch.
"Gugh.....guah....."
I groaned.
My shoulders...
The area around my scapula hurt, as if it had vanished.
Unconsciously, I had to confirm whether my arms had been ripped off my body or not. It was completely different from Izumu-kun's *Eating One*, and it was also different from what Magokoro used on Moeta. It wasn't just a technique relying on strength — it was violence relying on skill.
As I thought, they were professionals.
I couldn't win against their methods.
Even running away was half-assed.
But —
"Pitiable."
"Pitiable."
"Weak."
"Weak."
In front of me, having somehow been able to raise my body from the ground, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami were standing.
Without saying anything, symmetrically.
With their robes fluttering with the wind.
"I struggle to understand. I really can't understand why mister fox would choose someone like you as an enemy."
"I struggle to understand. I really can't understand why mister fox would choose someone like you as an enemy."

They said in turns.

They scorned me to confirm their self-worth.

Good grief, what simple personalities.

Fanatics are easy to understand.

Too easy to understand.

However, even then, there's no telling what they might do.

Therefore, I don't know what I should say.

".....Thinking about it, both of you ganging up on such a weak guy, isn't it somewhat cheap? Misora-chan, Takami-chan."

"Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter."

"I only kill."

"I only kill."

Because we are professional killers — their voices synced.

So they are not battle crazies like Izumu-kun, huh.

Well, thinking about it, in Izumu-kun's case, calmness was wiseness. Everything deemed **crafty** was all left to Rizumu-chan, so his nature was to be expected. If you add up Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan's personalities, they skillfully and smoothly complete each other.

But that wasn't the case for these Miotsukushi Sisters.

If you add them up, you get double.

One plus one becomes two.

It was that simple.

Simple and clear, unmatched and accurate.

Their duty as *professional killers* wouldn't vanish.

Reason wouldn't get through to them.

This kind of provocation wouldn't work.

Then there was one more thing left to try — though it was an overdone card to play, I could bring up the fox-masked man and search a way to break through from here — but with two opponents, there was little meaning in that as well. Hampering faith has a low success rate if it’s not a one-on-one confrontation.

But.

I knew that from the very beginning.

My aim was — it was something else.

I,

only pretended to stand up,

and softly, quietly, seamlessly,
got over the ditch,
put my back to the wall —
"**It's useless to get closer to that wall**."
"**It's useless to get closer to that wall**."
— and.
Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami said.
I stopped moving.
I was stopped when I was still in the ditch.
I won't go back, but I won't move anymore either.
"I at least know this much — this much."
"I at least know this much — this much."
"If you get close to the Imperial Palace, an alarm rings."
"If you get close to the Imperial Palace, an alarm rings."
"I know this much."
"I know this much."
.....I was seen through.
The wall behind my back was the wall surrounding the Sentou palace.
I hadn't actually heard it ring, but if you carelessly get too close to that wall, a sensor gets activated and a seriously loud sound alarms the security — Nanananami told me that. I turned at the Demizu square aiming for that wall,
and I was read like an open book, huh.
".....But being read doesn't change anything. Even if you are known *professional killers* from the back world, physically speaking, I can get over that ditch and jump to that wall faster than you can catch me."
I told those two that.
My awareness still focused on that wall.
"Well, I don't know the details either, but — I can't imagine there's any stupid rule like the alarm being deactivated at night. You girls don't want it to become a big affair either, do you? T**hat would bother mister fox**."
"....."
"....."
"If you say you retreat now, I won't go after you. Of course, I fully understand that your goal is my life, but — even then, there should be a point of compromise."
"None."

They answered instantly in sync.
And,
"It's useless."
"It's useless."
Without seeming to waver in the slightest.
"It's useless to ring the alarm. Nobody will come."
"It's useless to ring the alarm. Nobody will come."
"……..? What are you saying? That's impossi—"
And.
Then, I noticed.
The Kyoto Imperial Garden.
Though it was night, there were too few people.
Rather than it being deserted, **there was no one at all**.
No one except for us.
Right, until now, I hadn't seen anyone.
No matter what, it was odd.
It wasn't even that late at night. Even though there was a university nearby, it was as if this Imperial Garden was in a different space than its surroundings...
Space!
Thirteen Stairs!
Space Creator — Ichirizuka Konomi!
"You're probably right."
"You're probably right."
The two — they laughed sadistically.
It was a crazed laugh.
I'm sure they were crazy.
No, they were normal like that.
Setting aside how they are as *professional killers*,
that was normal for the *Thirteen Stairs*.
Loyalty.
And fanaticism without loyalty.
But, even then, according to the information I got from Nureginu-san, Ichirizuka Konomi and the Miotsukushi Sisters should not be close. Rather, they should hate each other—
Was she here?
Nearby — was the Space Creator, Ichirizuka Konomi, here?

If she was — then even if the alarm sounded, it would certainly be useless. Needless to say, even Ichirizuka Konomi's *Space Creation* wasn't a kind of supernatural power, so if enough time passed, someone would hear the alarm and rush over here. But, there was no doubt that it would take some time.

Impossible.

Impossible. I didn't think that *Space Creator* could be used in such an extensive and open zone. I concluded on my own that it could only be used in closed space like a train or a school, however, if that wasn't the case, Misora-chan and Takami-chan wouldn't be able to hold Zukin-chan's upper body out in the open. But, if that kind of thing was possible, then anything was.

"Ko-Konomi — but why?"

I pulled my attention from the wall.

My body fell to the ground.

I fell in a sitting pose on the ditch.

It wasn’t that I wanted to sit.

The price of the ten seconds.

My legs wouldn't support me anymore.

My last bit of willpower —

my final hope went extinct.

"Why — setting you girls aside, Ichirizuka Konomi should be totally obedient to mister fox — there's no way she would disobey him like that."

"You talk as if you know, Nonsense User."

"You talk as if you know, Nonsense User."

"Despite not knowing anything."

"Despite not knowing anything."

Despite not knowing anything about mister fox.

They said, their voices united.

I had trouble understanding what they meant.

What? That way of saying it.

From the way they said it..... it's as if their actions, as if their violation of the order to not lay a hand on me, was itself an order from the fox-masked man's will.

There was no way.

That person stopped fighting me.

The battle with that person should have ended.

Or maybe it hadn't ended?

It wasn't really over?

That... was just a lie?

No..... that was probably not the case.

Based on how he spoke at first and how things had gone since then, there was no doubt that these two weren't respecting the fox-masked man's orders — looking at the last half-month, the fox-masked man really stopped fighting me.

Saitou Takashi really admitted his loss.

He was a man who could recognize his loss.

As one would expect from Humanity's Worst.

There was no way that was a lie.

At this point, that was certain.

Even in a situation like that, it was certain.

That's why —

In this case, the enigma was Ichirizuka Konomi.

Her actions.

The woman who should have been obedient to Saitou Takashi.

However — was that not all?

Was she... planning something?

Then what.....

What was she planning?

What exactly happened?

"Now," said Misora-chan.

"Now," said Takami-chan.

"We can't demand the impossible from Ichirizuka — although it is abrupt and silly, let's put an end to it now."

"We can't demand the impossible from Ichirizuka — although it is abrupt and silly, let's put an end to it now."

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

It's no good. I don't have time to organize my thoughts — if I thought a little more, I feel that I might have an epiphany, but in this situation — I don't have the leeway to get to that point.

Just... being killed.

Just being played with like a toy.

Like what happened to Zukin-chan.

Tortured and trampled — just like that.

That way — that kind of thing.
That kind of thing — that cruelly.
Just when I was finally able...
Just when I was able to return to peace, to ordinary life.
Miiko-san and Houko-chan,
and Magokoro.
and Kunagisa Tomo —
".....Hey."
I said.
In an offhand way.
"If you're going to kill me no matter what, just tell me one thing. I have one regret. I just want to know one thing."
"You can't." Misora-chan answered coldly.
"You can't." Takami-chan answered coldly.
"Don't say that. It has to do with mister fox."
When I said that, the two went silent.
They stayed silent, staring at me.
There was no affirmative answer, but I was at the very least allowed one question for the remainder of my life.
After breathing in once,
"Aikawa Jun."
I said.
"Aikawa-san — what happened to her?"
"What do you mean?"
"What do you mean?"
"I won't ask for details, I won't ask to be told that much. But I want you to at least tell me this: is Aikawa-san alive? Or — is she dead?"
Was she alive and not coming back?
Or was she not coming back because she was no longer alive?
I wanted to know that.
That was the only thing I wanted to know.
The Miotsukushi Sisters, in unison,
"She is alive."
Answered.
She is alive.
Hearing that, I was relieved.
I see.

Then, it's fine.
As long as she’s alive, it’s fine.
At the very end, I thought that.
No matter what she thought of her dad,
no matter what situation the fox-masked man was in —
I didn't mind.
I shut my mouth.
I didn’t intend to say anything more.
I didn’t intend to close my eyes.
Facing me, the two of them frowned in unison.
"I don't like it."
"I don't like it."
"I don't like it at all."
"I don't like it at all."
The two of them readily got in a stance.
Symmetrically — with a line of symmetry.
"I changed my mind. Not for mister fox's sake — I will kill you for my sake and by my will."
"I changed my mind. Not for mister fox's sake — I will kill you for my sake and by my will."
With a silent but certain intent to kill,
Miotsukushi Misora,
Miotsukushi Takami,
the two professional killers moved at the same time.
Die on both sides at the same time — with their voices synched.
"Iezakura-------"
"-------Hagataki."
"Taiin----------"
"----Shibaguruma."
"Eriita-----!"
"----Deigan!"
I didn't close my eyes.
I didn't even blink.
But I couldn't see anything.
Their movements didn't register in my eyes.
Only that result appeared.
In front of me, only the result was left.

"—What a masterpiece."

A face tattoo.
A boy with a face tattoo stood in front of me.
Turning his back to the Miotsukushi Sisters.
Catching Misora-chan's right hand with his left.
Catching Takami-chan's left hand with his right.
Facing me.
He was certainly there.
".....You're late, idiot."
"My bad, my bad — I was checking whether my DVD recorder's time was properly set up and it became this late."
"Have you been doing well?"
"Better than you."
"That's the most important."
"Kahahah."
The boy with the face tattoo laughed pleasantly.
"Gugh—"
"Gugh—"
Misora-chan, whose arm was fixed in place, glared with all her strength at the boy showing her his back.
Takami-chan, whose arm was fixed in place, glared with all her strength at the boy showing her his back.
And, for the first time, their voices got rough.
Removing the mask of tranquility, they raised their voices in a scream.
"Who are you — bastard!"
"Who are you — bastard!"
"Who are you yourselves with that stereo broadcast? I'm taken aback. What, are you this temple's nuns?" Even now, the boy with the face tattoo hadn't turned around. "Before asking who I am, you should first name yourself."
"Seventh step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Misora!"
"Eighth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Takami!"
"By the way the Imperial Palace isn't a temple. It's the remains of the imperial residence."
I said to the boy with the face tattoo.

"Don't carelessly say things without even knowing, Zerozaki—"

"Hitoshiki!"

On the opposite side of where she was caught, Misora-chan's left arm, on the opposite side of where she was caught, Takami-chan's right arm — when they lunged them towards him at the same time, still without looking at them, in a circle, using their arms respectively as an axis, as if doing a back hip circle, he did a backflip and landed behind the Miotsukushi Sisters.

"That's my name."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki said so.

Similar to a military uniform from the great war, buttons glowing from top to bottom.

Black security boots and black driver gloves.

With the front of his jacket left open, a red shirt peeked from below.

Something like a scarf was tied around his arm.

His hair, previously tied together, was flowing freely.

It might have been a bit shorter now.

And,

after removing his stylishly designed glasses.

Eyes.

Pupils.

Deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep,

deep to no end,

deep eyes that seemed to have darkness etched in them.

Deeply sinful pupils that seemed to have conquered gods.

"Kahahah—"

Zerozaki put the glasses he removed,

inside the pocket of his jacket.

"It's been a long time, observer. I never wanted to see you again."

"How nostalgic, demonic killer. Since the moment we parted, there was not a day where I didn't forget you."

We exchanged a greeting for our reunion.

"Good grief. No, no, really, the way you're on the verge of death for all my entrance scenes, I'm so thankful it makes me wanna cry."

"Right, right, it's a lot of trouble for me if I don't prep the stage for the minor characters with barely any screen time. So I'd appreciate it if you didn't laugh so much and thanked me more sincerely. What's that, winter clothing?

Long pants don't suit you, really. And wearing all black, too. I feel hot just looking at you, you know."

"I can't argue with that. What's up with this region? October's almost over and the temperature's still like this. Someone willingly living in a place with such irregular seasons must have a loose screw in their head."

"I wholeheartedly agree. The only one more crazy than someone living in a place like this would probably be a short guy who kills people in cold blood."

"Aah, but short guys who kill people in cold blood often turn out to be cool and fantastic. It's one of the world's great mysteries. Unlike guys who don't hesitate to fool people; people like that are often lame and uncool."

"Exactly. This world is so unfair. After all, someone nice like me, who lies for the sake of other people, ended up in such a horrible situation. I'll be frank; no matter how you think about it, the reason I got into such a horrible situation is because a certain prowler showed up."

"I see. Similar to how my life got even more absurd after I met a certain Nonsense User? That must be tough. I reaaally understand that hardship, I sympathize from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh please, stop that. Thinking about someone like you sympathizing with me makes me inadvertently want to kill myself."

"If you wanna do it, I'll give you a hand, free of charge — I was just thinking about how I wanted you dead, what a coincidence."

"Hoh, we must have a lot in common. I've also been constantly thinking for a long time now about how happy I'd be if you were to die."

"Well, we gotta leave the fun for the end."

"Exactly."

Zerozaki laughed.

I didn't laugh.

"Wh-what are you guys?"

Miotsukushi Sisters yelled with their voices in unison.

Zerozaki and I, with our voices in sync, answered.

"Good friends."

Zerozaki —

he released a powerful kick aiming for Misora-chan's temporal region. Because of how wide the motion was, I'd thought there was no way Misora-chan wouldn't avoid it, but when she did, the same leg returned from the opposite direction.

"Gugh—!"

Although she somehow managed to guard with her arms,
Misora-chan collapsed on the ground.
When Zerozaki tried to follow up after this,
"-----Iunaraku."
Takami-chan attacked his back.
Without mercy, without an ounce of doubt.
She swung her arm from behind him.
"----Nakaganna!"
"Mm? Are you perhaps professional killers?"
Zerozaki jumped over Misora-chan, who was laying on the ground, and by doing so, dodged the attack coming from his back. Naturally, when leaping, he didn't forget to step on Misora-chan's stomach.
Hooh.....
I'd thought he was just a knife expert, but Zerozaki Hitoshiki, the demonic killer, seemed to also be good at martial arts.
"Hey, defective product."
"What is it, human failure?"
"I don't understand the situation. If you have free time, explain."
"These girls are professional killers and are trying to kill me."
"I see. Allies of justice, huh."
"An evil character like you is a perfect fit for their opponent, right?"
"You say such cruel things when I disguise myself as Santa on Christmas to distribute presents to unfortunate children. What are their names?"
"So you weren't listening, even after telling them to name themselves. What a horrible guy. Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami. From a branch family of the Niounomiya Troupe of Massacre Magic."
"I see. So they're small fries."
Zerozaki said "I got the situation." and switched into a stance.
With his legs parted widely, one in front and one behind him, it was a kung fu stance.
Misora-chan had already stood up,
and stood on the other side of Takami-chan's symmetry line.
"How—"
"How—"
The two of them asked Zerozaki in turns.
"How were you able to enter? This space — it's currently structured so that it cannot be entered or left by anyone but us."

"How were you able to enter? This space — it’s currently structured so that it cannot be entered or left by anyone but us."

"Heeh, what, so there's a barrier? But unfortunately, barriers don't work on me. I overcame that a few months ago."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki said, casually.

As usual, he still had a smile on his face.

"Then, Zerozaki —"

Since Misora-chan and Takami-chan said nothing, I was the one to ask Zerozaki this time.

"**Not how**, but **why here**? How were you able to know that I was in this situation, in a place like this?"

"I asked someone."

"Kouta-san?"

"Kouta? Aah, that braids and denim girl. She's an ill-natured and unpleasant woman. I was careless and just about to fall in love with her. But well, not her. I met that thief quite a while ago."

"Then who? Who did you ask?"

"A woman wearing a coat."

Coat.....?

Ah, maybe Emoto-san?

Thinking that, I looked at Misora-chan and Takami-chan,

"That traitor—"

"That traitor—"

And they gritted their teeth harshly.

Then, it was Emoto-san.

Step.

Step step.

Step step step.

The Miotsukushi Sister's steps echoed on the ground.

Aiming at Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

They glared vigorously.

Misora-chan and Takami-chan joined the *Thirteen Stairs* relatively late, but they should have heard from the fox-masked man that he’d chosen me as his enemy in Zerozaki Hitoshiki's stead. Then, although they hadn't put it into words, they must have their own thoughts on him. At the very least, since they’d put their faith in the fox-masked man, they couldn't ignore Zerozaki completely.

Zerozaki was able to block their last attack, but now that they understood he was not an opponent they could underestimate, the two should come at Zerozaki with their full force.

They should be trying to kill Zerozaki.

"....By the way, Zerozaki. What about your knives?"

"Aah. I currently don't have any."

"Don't have any? You?"

"There were some circumstances. I ended up using them all. Thanks to that, my body feels really light, though."

".....Is that so. That's splendid."

I took *Unsigned* out from the holster of my jacket and threw it with spin towards Zerozaki.

Being accustomed to it, Zerozaki easily gripped the knife with his right, knife-holding hand.

"What's that?"

"Something I received recently, but I'm just holding on to it now — no, it's a memento."

I said.

"Use it."

"Sankyuu."

"But don't kill them."

"Hoh. Don't kill them?"

Zerozaki,

with *Unsigned*, which must just look like a small knife to an outsider, in his right hand, he shifted his pose, lowered his upper half and moved closer to the Miotsukushi Sisters.

"I wonder who he’s talking to, that observer. I swear, he doesn't understand what kind of guy this human failure is. I'm a virtuous man who has never ever killed someone before, you know?"

"Just like I’m a virtuous man who has never fooled anyone even once?"

"Exactly."

"Both of us just can’t do wrong, really."

"I swear. We're too good, at our roots."

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami moved —

Zerozaki Hitoshiki also moved.

They crossed at the middle point.

"Kaii-------"

"---Awaame."

"Waija-----"

"----Seiitsu."

Not just their hands — the sisters also attacked with their legs.

Their clothes were loose enough, and it didn't make it easy for them to move, but on the other hand, it also made it harder to read their moves. And in fact, Zerozaki was so busy dodging or redirecting the repeated attacks of the Miotsukushi Sisters that he had no time to attack with the weapon he'd finally acquired.

The girls,

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami didn't scatter.

They continued to be aligned.

They attacked on both sides at the same time, without being even a particle off.

If they are so thorough it's even more of a pain than if they were scattered.

As I thought, it's hard to fight multiple opponents at the same time.

It's not just because there are twice the amount of hands. The biggest problem is **that the range where attacks can come from becomes wider** — you can't focus your defense on a single point! You can't focus, which equals in a lack of concentration—

"Yasagama-----"

"--------Kuina."

"Inatsu------"

"-----Benkou."

Zerozaki, as if he couldn't endure the fierce attacks of Misora-chan and Takami-chan, collapsed backwards. No, collapsed isn't right; I guess slipped would be accurate in this case. Certainly, this place, filled with little rocks, wasn't suited for action, but that's the same either way.

But.

Even then, Zerozaki was smiling.

"Oh my, oops!"

When he fell, he used his hip as a support, and using his legs as a scythe, he mowed down at Misora-chan and Takami-chan's ankles.

Not expecting a counterattack directly after collapsing, the two fell onto Zerozaki.

Of course, they should have been able to hold themselves up after that.

But these two didn't.

The two professional killers didn't do so.
Rather,
like that, directly down,
they fell — fell on Zerozaki Hitoshiki.
A follow up, they wanted to finish him. Their right and left hands,
got in position,
"Raori-----"
"----Eougi."
"Tauzura-----"
"------Jakago."
"Yaata------!"
"----Dagoku!"
Without being able to grasp the timing to stand up, seeing their palms accelerating without any hesitation, as if they threw they bodies away, like they weren't thinking about the consequences, like falling from a ceiling--
Zerozaki stopped the blows from the front.
Temporarily leaving *Unsigned* on the ground---
Misora-chan's hand,
Takami-chan's hand,
He caught each of them, entangling their fingers together.
"....."
"....."
The shock of the attack — it wasn't transmitted.
All I could see was him simply catching the blow.
Zerozaki grinned,
"You know, it's my first time holding hands with girls."
Making this humorous statement,
he pulled their arms down and struck them to the ground.
With the recoil, he raised himself.
With their hands still connected.
"What's the saying; a flower in each hand? But sorry. You girls are too short. If you want to go out with me, you should be at least over one hundred and seventy centimeters."
"Ba-bastard—"
"Ba-bastard—"
"Stop there."

Zerozaki finally released their hands — step, step, step, hopping on one foot, he moved back three steps.

"Having two of your special attacks blocked and still coming at me is just foolishness. At your level, you should be able to get it just from that exchange. You can't win against me. **You're a hundred years too early**—"

That...

That should have been Aikawa-san's line.

Zerozaki continued boldly.

"The only people I wanted to kill but haven't been able to are Humanity's Strongest and the Nonsense User. Now, try to draw your own conclusions from that. **What'll happen to you**, Miotsukushi Misora, Miotsukushi Takami, professional killer ladies? Do you have enough confidence, reasons, grounds to believe that you won't die by my hand — after that exchange, do you have any of that left?"

"....."

"....."

"It's no good, Zerozaki." Still without fully standing up, but with my upper half raised, I said in the stead of the Miotsukushi Sisters silently glaring at Zerozaki. "These girls are fanatics — they really aren't afraid of dying as martyrs."

"I see. So they're not afraid of dying, huh."

Zerozaki said.

"But you are afraid of me, right?"

"....."

"....."

"Be at ease, be at ease, my cute cute professional killers — if you're scared of me, I don't mind letting you go. Disappear wherever you want. If you want to run away, I won't move one step. I won't even speak. I probably won't even follow you with my eyes. Of course, if you head towards me, it's a different story. Be it righteous self-defense or excessive self-defense, even if that Nonsense User tries to stop me, I will, without restraint—"

Zerozaki

stuck out his red tongue,

Looked at the two in priest robes, as if eating them.

" —chop you up and line the pieces for public viewing."

Misora-chan and

Takami-chan

stood up with a jump,
and greatly distanced themselves from Zerozaki.
"Next time — it won't end like this."
"Next time — it won't end like this."
Kill.
We will kill you without a fail.
We will kill you twice at the same time from both sides.
Saying that, the two of them turned on their heels.
And faded into the darkness of the Kyoto night.
As I'd thought, they didn't possess half-assed legs.
They got out of our sight in a moment.
"Kahahah — what a masterpiece."
Zerozaki said, watching the pair's backs for much longer than me.
"Certainly, as you said, they probably didn't fear being martyrs but, they were raised as *professional killers*. Achieving their objective is their end goal. Their objective wasn't really to kill me, right? If it was to kill you, they'd choose to escape here."
".....Then you should have captured them."
"You were the one who said not to kill them, weren't you?"
"When I say not to kill them, it obviously means capture them alive, tie them with rope and offer them to me. You can't even understand that much?"
"My bad. I thought 'don't kill them' means letting them breathe. Kahahah, I still haven't gotten over my jetlag."
".....Were you abroad?"
"I thought I told you. Don't you remember? What a horrible memory you got, defective product." Zerozaki picked up *Unsigned* from where he left it on the ground, approached me and handed it to me. "Now, what'll we do?"
"Let me see..... If you ask me that, I have to think about it," I took the knife and put it back in the holster. ".....I wonder."
Zukin-chan's corpse — it was near the aphananthe tree.
But, that's not something for me to interfere with. She should be cleaned somewhere I have no influence. The reason why Zukin-chan and the eleventh Furuyari Zukin wanted *Unsigned*, is still unclear, but since Zukin-chan is dead, that's trivial to me.
What's not trivial is Zukin-chan herself, though.
More importantly, what I should be thinking about.....

Errr..... since the Miotsukushi Sisters had left there would be no point to staying by herself, so Ichirizuka Konomi should also have left the Imperial Garden.

For starters.

Let's say we were able to avoid an emergency situation.

The danger was over.

But..... what in the world was that?

The fox-masked man should have left me alone, so why were three of the *Thirteen Stairs*, who should have been the fox-masked man's limbs, trying to kill me?

Setting aside the Miotsukushi Sisters, Ichirizuka Konomi.

If the Miotsukushi Sisters had been acting alone, the problem would have just been the fox-masked man's high charisma and lack of authority, but since Ichirizuka Konomi was involved, the story was different. Conversely, if Ichirizuka Konomi had been aiming at me on her own, I would have guessed it was due to the fox-masked man’s will, but judging by the Miotsukushi Sisters' words, that shouldn't have been the case.

Anyway.....

So it was still not over, huh.

It was still..... continuing?

"Here."

"Yeah."

I grabbed Zerozaki's hand and stood up.

My breathing recovered enough that I could walk.

Though my shoulder still hurt, it didn't seem to be broken or dislocated. I was struck from behind while running, so it shouldn't have been that different from having jumped. I minimized the shock.

However, that was the minimum.....?

Thinking about that, Zerozaki might have actually been amazing, easily catching the Miotsukushi Sisters’ full power attacks.

I wonder who was stronger, between him and Izumu-kun.....

Ah, right.

"Hey, Zerozaki. Do you know Niounomiya Izumu?"

"Mm. Aah, I know him, why? It's that guy with beautiful long hair, straitjacket and split personality, right?"

"Not just by name. Have you met him?"

"Yeah. I don't know the *little sister*, but a few years ago I met the *big brother.* Rather... well, it's a long and absurd story. So what about it?"

"No....."

As I thought, they knew each other.

I wondered what their relationship was.

But before I could ask, Zerozaki,

"What's up with Niounomiya?"

He asked.

It seems he was curious why I knew that name. Certainly, Hime-chan also hadn't disclosed a lot of information about Niounomiya.....

"Well..... both of us have a lot of things we want to ask..... and other stuff to catch up on..... So, for now, let's move. Come to the apartment. Let's talk leisurely."

Since then, what had he been doing?

The story of the Zerozaki clan being annihilated.....

And how it was in Houston.

And about Kouta-san.....

And more importantly,

the connection between Zerozaki Hitoshiki and the fox-masked man —

there should have been a connection.

I'd thought it would no longer be useful, but now that it had come to this...

"Aah, I'll ask just in case, but Zerozaki, do you happen to hate people from the *Yamiguchi* house?"

"No, not really?"

"Do you like little girls or little sisters?"

"What are you talking about?"

"No, it's fine if you don't hate them."

Niounomiya really hated *Yamiguchi*, but at the very least, the individual Zerozaki Hitoshiki didn't appear to hold that kind of animosity. Then it should have been fine to let him meet Houko-chan. Though I don't know how Houko-chan might react..... I've heard that the Zerozaki Clan was pretty detested.....

"By the way, that onee-chan, is she still around?"

"Um?"

"That cool onee-chan with straight black hair."

"Straight..... No, aah, Miiko-san?"

So she had her hair down when she met Zerozaki.

They should have met in my room.

"Yeah, she's living there. Why?"

"If we're going to the apartment, let me see that onee-chan first. I headed back to Kyoto to see her more than you."

"Shut up. Don't touch her, she's mine."

"What? Is that so?"

"It is."

Though I was rejected.

Well, this was this, that was that.

Don't mix them together.

With me on the left and Zerozaki on the right, we started walking, aiming for the Imperial Garden's Nakadachiuri gate, though not in symmetry. Going straight west from there, we should have arrived close to the apartment.

"That reminds me — where did you meet Emoto-san?"

"What?"

"Emoto-san. The person with the coat."

"Aah. Her, so her name's Emoto. Emoto, Emoto, Emoto, huh — Mm? Emoto? Is she related to the girl from May?"

"No, the character is different. Just a coincidence. I'll be damned if destiny had anything to do with it."

"Hmm. I don't really get it. Well, I met her in front of your apartment."

"Um?"

"I went to the apartment thinking I could see you, and she told me where you were, so I ran like Melos and rushed over to your side."

"I hate that story..... Selinuntius, who originally had nothing to do with it, went through the most hardships."

"Don't read it so shallowly. If Melos were in the same situation, Selinuntius would have done the same. They both understood that. Each were like a part of the other. Isn't that what friendship is?"

"Maybe. But I hate it. The only thing that should be appreciated from that story is that Melos was a siscon."

"I'm sure the story was definitely not about that....."

But,

why was Emoto-san in front of my apartment? Was she trying to tell me about the situation but realized that I'd already departed? But if that was the case, she'd have told Houko-chan or Magokoro, who she'd met before..... Why a stranger like Zerozaki?

Well, anyway, what matters is that Emoto-san is safe — I guess I should think that. No, I can't really be at ease yet. I'm worried about everyone from the apartment..... We need to return quickly. In retrospect, not having lifted the defense from the Kunagisa Syndicate was a good move.....

"But Zerozaki, I'm impressed you managed to talk to Emoto-san. That person doesn't seem capable of talking normally to someone she's meeting for the first time..... In the first place, it's impressive you were able to hear what she had to say."

"Why? She certainly wore some strange clothes, but her way of talking was direct. Pretty normal, you know."

"Direct? Normal? That's a joke, right? Why would you lie to me like that? It took me a while to finally be able to talk normally to her. She immediately starts crying whenever you say something, after all."

"Cry?"

"Did she not cry?"

"There's no way an adult would cry that easily."

"Um?"

"Um?"

Huh?

Are we... not on the same wavelength?

".....Hey, Zerozaki. The person you met in front of my apartment, was she a beautiful woman wearing a raincoat and long boots?"

"A raincoat and long boots?"

"Or maybe a white coat and a swimsuit?"

".....If I saw someone like that, I'd run away in two seconds."

Zerozaki answered, looking creeped out.

That expression was pretty intense.

It seems... I was wrong.

"Then..... who was that? A strange woman—"

"I said a strange woman, not a pervert. The woman I saw had a coat and, ah."

When we turned around the Nakadachiuri gate

Zerozaki raised his voice.

And, pointed forward.

"That person over there."

"Mm?"

"That person over there. The one I'm talking about."

Looking at her,
hearing that, looking at her.
Leaning against the gate's pillar,
there was a woman.
A trenchcoat with long hems.
Under that, a thin skirt and a light grey turtleneck summer sweater.
Stockings and white pumps.
A brand name handbag.
Only her coat stood out.
The woman,
with her long slit eyes, noticed Zerozaki and me.
Fixing us
with her clear cut,
and resolute expression.
Her eyes looked like they'd never reflected anything, as if she could see through everything.
Her red lips, from which her canines protruded, moved bewitchingly.

"Fourth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Utage Kudan."

She talked in a very bored tone, as if she had experienced hell and tragedy and sin and despair and chaos and submission, all at the same time — as if declaring the triviality of the world.
"U-Utage, Ku..."
"That being said, I'm currently not talking as a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, but as a close friend of *Dead Blue (The Verge of Death)* — ancient member of *Legion*, *Trigger Happy End (Corpse)* Shigai Touno."
"……!"
Shigai Touno — ancient *Legion*!
Cluster, Mate, *Russel*, *Inside* —
Team!
*Ku*nagisa — *Ku*dan! (TL : Kunagisa's 'ku' uses an ancient kanji of the number nine while Kudan's 'ku' uses the current kanji)
Utage Kudan — Shigai Touno!
They were the same person!
Then I made Kunagisa call someone under the fox-masked man's control, one of the fox-masked man's limbs, just to protect myself?!

"Don't make a face like that, you can relax. Between mister fox and *Blue* (Verge), I am more loyal to *Blue*. I have betrayed mister fox about five thousand and forty times, but I haven't betrayed *Blue* even once."

"F-five.....?"

"It's also the factorial of seven."

With a straight face, Utage-san — no, Touno-san?

Having two names — it was better than Noise, but it was still hard for me to deal with.....

"What's up with her?" Zerozaki asked as if he didn't really understand. "Is she your enemy? Can I kill her?"

"N-no..... you can't kill her—"

Naturally, I didn't understand it very well either.

No,

I didn't get it at all.

"So, I don't know if you're Touno-san or Kudan-san, but w-why are you here—"

"To betray *Blue* — no, Kunagisa Tomo."

Taking out a tobacco box from her coat pocket.

It was a brand with low tar.

Holding it in her mouth, she lit it with her zippo.

"I didn't tell mister fox, but I heard an awful lot about you from *Cheetah* and *Green Green Green*, and of course, from *Blue* herself too. It's truly pleasant. Us *Legion*, with all eight of us — we can finally be alternatives for you alone."

No — spouting smoke, Touno-san corrected herself.

"Not even the eight of us are enough."

"....."

"In the end, all we *Legion* ever did was rebaking and buffoonery, nothing more than copy and pasting what you did to the Kunagisa Syndicate six years ago — I wish it was at least cut and paste."

Not self-deprecatingly.

Not blaming me.

Just pallidly.

Like nonsense.

And... facing me.

"Nonsense User. Do you like cars?"

".....I like things like Fiats, but I don't especially care about automobiles in general."

"Then I'll change my question. What would happen if you suddenly activated a motor which hadn't been maintained for over ten years, which had rusted and which only had value as an antique?"

"That—"

I didn't understand what she wanted to say.

I took one step on the side.

I removed myself from the line between Zerozaki and Touno-san.

" —there's no such thing."

"Ah, that so? So there's none."

"But I know what would happen. It would just burn in no time and break apart."

"Absolutely?"

"There's no need to test it."

I said.

"What are you trying to say? And first, what did you mean earlier by betraying Kunagisa?"

"Mean, huh — there's no meaning. Just take it literally. I'm not like Utsurigi, and obviously not like you. I don't search for meaning in words and concepts. I'm always literal in what I say, I don't care for meaning or depth. Betraying Kunagisa Tomo means going against *Blue*'s will..... disobeying *Blue*'s orders, that's all. *Trigger Happy End* will be, from the bottom of her heart, without hesitation — infidel to *Dead Blue*. I've already lied to *Blue* and fooled *Blue* plenty of times, but this is my first time betraying her."

"The first time—"

"Kunagisa Tomo is done for."

Touno

took out a pair of glasses from the same pocket as the tobacco box and calmly put it on.

I couldn't see her eyes.

Her eyes were no longer visible.

"Do-done for? Done for, what do you—"

I didn't understand.

I didn't understand what she was saying.

As if scorning me from the bottom of her heart,

to that incompetent me,

to me, who was happier not knowing anything, Touno-san said.

There's nothing that can be done — it cannot be helped,

she declared that to me.

From Touno-san's eyes,

a single tear spilled.

Touno-san was betraying Kunagisa.

Betraying Kunagisa Tomo for Kunagisa Tomo's sake.

"You're to blame, Nonsense User. You're at fault, you're at fault. It's your responsibility, you're the only one to blame. Since who-knows-when, you ceased being stopped and started changing on your own, so Kunagisa Tomo, too, couldn't afford continuing to halt. She had no choice — no choice but to grow."

Ii-chan never changes.

Ii-chan never changes, forever.

"Th-that's — that's, why—"

"There's no way a body that's been stopped for ten years can handle growth at this point. You should have understood if you'd thought about it. Kunagisa was very careful to not give it away to you, but the people from the Syndicate and the old members from *Legion*, everyone but you know about it. While you were getting all fired up about your purpose of being mister fox's opponent, while you were out fighting alone, everyone except you already finished saying their goodbyes. Kunagisa Tomo—

Could die at any moment."

"Halloween" is the END.

Afterword

In reality, the home of the subway Tozai line, the Kyoto public office station, is made so that people absolutely cannot fall on the rails, but what I thought upon seeing that was "why isn't every station in Japan made like this"? Even though, if they did that, there wouldn't be any more cases of people dying after being hit by trains, stations like the Kyoto public office station are extremely minor and, in the last twelve and odd years, I've only seen three other spots like that. Of course, the answer to that is obvious; the cost of doing that (labour, time and money) currently cannot be financed with enough leeway. To put it plainly, even if there exists a best decision, if it's a decision that can't physically be put into action, then it's no longer the best. Well, it's that kind of story. For example, if we used current scientific knowledge, we could easily make a flying car, but that would have an absurdly high cost and driving it would be incomparable to driving on land, so we'd need to create a special driving license; at that point, we shouldn't develop one at all. It's similar to a conclusion like that. For armchair theories or things requiring some sort of sacrifice, it's not because we can do them that we should. But if you think really hard about it, airplanes have tires attached, so aren't they technically flying cars? Or something. Well, when I sit on a bench in the Kyoto public office station, I always end up thinking that.

This work is the sequel to *Uprooted Radical (Part One): The Thirteen Stairs*, the second and middle book of the arc. If you were to compare Part One as rushing from right to left, this work would be a story spinning its own wheels, going in circles. Everyone has times when things don't go as planned, when the story doesn't progress in a convenient way. Just like that, allies and enemies are both toyed with, all the same. If you want everyone to cooperate, you'll end up dragged down as much as you are helped by others. But, in the end, thinking that you are the only one being relied upon is the worst thing to do — if they knew that from the start, maybe people could be a bit more kind. It will soon be time to put an end to the Nonsense User, who is the embodiment of running in circles. Therefore, it will end after the CM. If you've read this far, I would like for you to read the last entry of the Zaregoto Series, *Uprooted Radical (Part Three): The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User*.

In putting this book out to the world, the only role I had was writing the text and nothing else. At the very least, I think that I was able to come this far thanks to the numerous people of the editing, publishing, and sales department. I am deeply and sincerely thankful to my editor in-charge Oota Katsushi-sama and illustrator in-charge Take-san first and foremost, and also to everyone who supported the Zaregoto Series.

Nisio Isin

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NISIOISIN
The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User
UPROOTED RADICAL
3
Illustration
take
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NOVELS

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Nekosogi Radical (Third)
The Blue Savant And The Nonsense User
Nisio Isin

Price: Physical 1080 Yen (Tax Included)

"As long as I'm alive, I cannot give up on seeing the end of the world, the end of the Story."
Thus spoke Humanity's Worst Player, the "fox-masked man" to "I," the Nonsense User.
Kunagisa bidding farewell. Magokoro rampaging. And, Aikawa reviving...
All the notes move to satisfy all the foreshadowing in the series, this is the ultimate crescendo!
And, and, and, and, and—
This is the finale of the three-part Uprooted Radical movement, putting a close on this must-read, state-of-the-art young adult entertainment Zaregoto Series!
Go ahead, Nisio Isin!!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AKAGAMI IRIA	LADY
HANDA REI	HEAD MAID
CHIGA AKARI	TRIPLET MAID, ELDEST DAUGHTER
CHIGA HIKARI	TRIPLET MAID, MIDDLE DAUGHTER
CHIGA TERUKO	TRIPLET MAID, YOUNGEST DAUGHTER
IBUKI KANAMI	ARTIST
SASHIRONO YAYOI	COOK
HIMENA MAKI	FORTUNE-TELLER
SONOYAMA AKANE	SCHOLAR
SAKAKI SHINYA	ATTENDANT
ATEMIYA MUIMI	STUDENT
USAMI AKIHARU	STUDENT
EMOTO TOMOE	STUDENT
AOII MIKOKO	STUDENT
SASA SASAKI	DETECTIVE
IKARUGA KAZUHITO	DETECTIVE
SHISEI YUMA	ZIG ZAG
HAGIHARA SHIOGI	STRATEGIST
SAIJOU TAMAMO	INSATIBLE
ORIGAMI NOA	DIRECTOR
SHADOU KYOUICHIROU	RESEARCHER
OOGAKI SHITO	ASSISTANT
UZE MISACHI	SECRETARY
KOUTARI HINAYOSHI	RESEARCHER
NEO FURUARA	RESEARCHER
MIYOSHI KOKOROMI	RESEARCHER
KASUGAI KASUGA	RESEARCHER
UTSURIGI GAISUKE	GREEN GREEN GREEN
HINEMOSU SUZU	DOUBLE FLICK
GOTOOOROKI SEIGO	REVERSE CROSS
MUNEFUYU MUTSUKI	CUBIC LOOP
NADEKIRI HAKURAKU	DANCING WITH MADNESS
AYAMINAMI HYOU	CHEETA
SHIKIGISHI KISHIKI	BAD KIND
SHIGAI TOUNO	TRIGGER HAPPY-END
KIGAMINE YAKU	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA	EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT
MIOUNOMIYA IZUMU	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOUNOMIYA RIZUMU	GREAT DETECTIVE
ASANO MIIKO	SWORDSMAN
YUKARIKI ICHIHIME	GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO	GIRL
ISHINAGI MOETA	GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU	DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI	WITCH
ISHIMARU KOUTA	GREAT THIEF
ZEROZAKI HITOSHIKI	DEMONIC KILLER
KAJOU AKIRA	SECOND
ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI	SPACE CREATOR
EMOTO SONOKI	DOCTOR
UTAGE KUDAN	AERIAL WEAPON
FURUYARI ZUKIN	SWORDSMITH
TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU	THOUGHT MANIPULATOR
MIGISHITA RURERO	PUPPETEER
YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU	ASSASSIN
MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NOISE	DISSONANCE
KINO RAICHI	POISON USER
OMOKAGE MAGOKORO	ORANGE SEED
SAITOU TAKASHI	WORST
AIKAWA JUN	RED
KUNAGISA TOMO	BLUE
I (NARRATOR)	PROTAGONIST

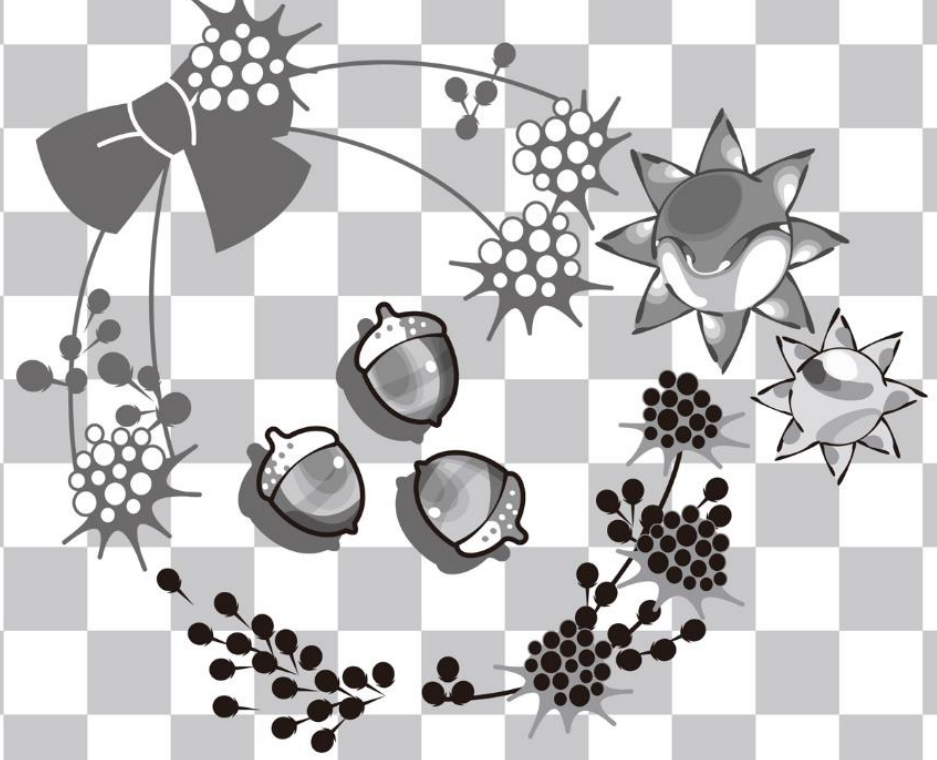


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACT 17 —— A LONG GOODBYE

ACT 18 —— A CONTINUATION THAT DOESN'T END

ACT 19 —— THE FINAL HOUR

ACT 20 —— ALLY OF JUSTICE

ACT 21 —— HOME

ACT 22 —— SCATTERING LACERATION

ACT 23 —— THE END OF THE STORY

LAST ACT —— AND THEN AFTER THAT

ACT 17 – A LONG GOODBYE

UTAGE KUDAN

AERIAL WEAPON

0

Because I like, I hate.
Though I hate, I like.

1

The origin was revenge.
I think it was revenge.
I think it was atonement.
I think it was a grudge.
I think it was resentment.
I think it was venting out.
But all of that is wrong.
In the end, that's just theory.
I just wanted to do something.
If I didn't do anything, I felt like I would die.
Therefore.

Therefore, I met the blue boy.

The first time I saw her.
Kunagisa Tomo was a child playing in a sandbox.
Building a sand castle.
What was the purpose of that castle?
Why was she building it?
That, I do not know.
Anyway, Kunagisa was wholeheartedly—

Wholeheartedly gathering all her concentration.

Making all her concentration gather.

Building a castle.

Her castle.

Her castle was already near completion.

Without any real reason, I kicked that castle.

Destruction.

I destroyed it.

Of course, I didn't know Kunagisa Tomo at that point.

I didn't know who that blue boy was.

I didn't know the grounds for the blue hair before my eyes.

I only kicked the castle, because I didn't like it.

I didn't like the form of the castle.

I really had no reason.

Kunagisa didn't say anything.

She didn't even look at me.

She reacted as if the sand had collapsed because of a strong gust of wind.

Not just inside her field of vision,

Inside that blue boy too, I didn't exist.

She scooped sand and rebuilt the collapsed castle.

Astonishment.

What surprised me was the fact that Kunagisa returned every grain of sand that had collapsed, without fail, to its previous position, to its previous spot. That she restored the castle, in the strictest sense, back to an unchanged state.

For that action, just how much memory, how much cognitive ability, and how much precision was necessary—I didn't want to think about something that preposterous. Kunagisa wasn't recognizing the sand as a whole, but every grain individually, and at that time I understood that she was probably also looking at the world in the same way, in atomic units.

And so, I yielded.

I yielded to the blue boy.

I was resolved to be exploited.

I was resolved, and I accepted it.

The moment I met her.

At that very moment, I lost to Kunagisa.

I...

At that time, in frustration and in a fit of anger,

Really, without any reason,

I kicked Kunagisa's blue hair.

"Kusanagi? Kuginasa? What?"

"Kunagisa, it's Kunagisa. K・U・N・A・G・I・S・A・Kunagisa. And then Tomo, for friend. Kunagisa Tomo."

"Hmm. I see. Kunagisa-kun, huh. Heeh, your head, it's pretty cool."

"You can call me Tomo."

"Alright. Then you can call me Tomo too."

"That's confusing. I'm choosing to call you Ii-chan."

"Then I shall call you Ii-chan too."

"That's confusing."

I learned that the blue boy was a girl.

I learned that the girl was a direct descendant of the Kunagisa bloodline.

The direct descendant of the Kunagisa Syndicate that had invited me,

And that my little sister was a sacrifice for her.

That I was exploited for the girl's sake.

I learned everything.

Without missing anything, I learned.

The only thing I didn't know until the end was why the girl called me Ii-chan.

That was...a trivial detail.

There wasn't any special reason.

The origin—

The origin was revenge.

It was revenge.

It was atonement.

It was a grudge.

It was resentment.

It was venting, at least it should have been.

Before I knew it, we...

Slowly...leisurely.

Brazenly...impudently.

As if it was natural.

We spent time together.

We spent it together to the point of becoming sad.

A long time.

An eternity.

But in the blink of an eye.

A catastrophe immediately befell us.

I was trying—trying to save her.

I think I was trying to save Kunagisa Tomo.

But in the end, my actions were nothing more than revenge and atonement and a grudge and resentment and venting. But there's just one thing—if I had to judge one thing as true for the me of that time, it'd be that I certainly intended to save Kunagisa Tomo.

I didn't intend to break her.

I didn't intend to kill her.

Even if everything else was no good—

That alone.

That alone could be forgiven.

For the me of that time, when my existence was drenched in sin and corruption, even if that existence was unforgivable no matter what—even then, if I had to say, that alone is forgivable.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Same as before—she isn't a tiny bit off in her atomic vision.

The me of that time, for her sake—
Wouldn’t even hesitate to die.

Even then—but even then, why?
Why did I run?

And.
Why did I...
Change on my own?

Even though I wanted to be at her side.
Even though I swore to be at her side.
Even though I wanted to be with her forever.
Even though I should not have changed.
Even then...

"Yaah, Ii-chan. You were faster than I thought. No, I guess in this case, saying 'you were slower than I thought' might be more suitable?"

Kunagisa—

Kunagisa Tomo was on the roof of her building in Shirosaki—she was sitting lightly, in a really relaxed way, on top of the fence surrounding it on four sides.

If she threw off her balance even a little,
She would drop from the height of the building.
In that position.
In that stance.
With that balance—
That’s probably how we’d been living our lives.
Kunagisa and I had been doing that forever.
Right, that's why.
It was never weird.

As Kunagisa said—

This scene, it was too late.

It was probably earlier than expected.

But it was later than it should have been.

It had gone too, too well.

We had gone like this for too long.

We had lived too long.

"St—"

I tried to call out to Kunagisa—

Tried to call out normally.

But even then, my words got stuck.

I failed to call her.

Kunagisa turned only her head towards me and looked at me with a faint smile.

"Come this way."

She said.

"Next to Boku-sama-chan is Ii-chan's seat."

"...Right."

That was right.

For some reason, I was able to agree.

I approached Kunagisa one step at a time,

Easily scaled up the fence,

And sat next to her.

"It's high."

"One hundred and forty meters. Higher than Tokyo Tower."

"Is it fine?"

"What is?"

"Being somewhere this high."

"I'm fine with high places."

"But—"

Kunagisa Tomo was living with three mental disorders. The first one was being unable to execute any harsh vertical movement on her own. Though it was different for her territory, within the familiar landscape of her house, this castle shouldn't have counted as inside Kunagisa's domain. There was no way Kunagisa could endure such vertical movement—no, if it was just her climbing on the roof, she could have had Utage Kudan from earlier, Shigai Touno, accompany her, but even then, I doubt that Touno-san would have allowed her in a place like this. According to Touno-san, it wasn't certain that she could meet me—

"Aah. **Those kinds of things** are fine now."

Kunagisa said nonchalantly.

"In the first place, they were like shackles that I put on myself to have someone near me."

"Shackles..."

"Chains, maybe? And the two others, well, it's a similar story. Like building a character in retrospective. That being said, even then, the only one that stayed next to me until the end was Ii-chan, though."

"That's not...really the case. I'm just a replaceable, common—"

"That wasn't really the case. That was not the case at all. Come on, Ii-chan's replacement? Since you came here, that means you met Nacchan, right? Shigai Touno, *Trigger Happy-End (Corpse)*."

"...Yeah." I nodded. "That person, which one is her real name? No, rather than her real name... Which is her true identity? Shigai Touno or Utage Kudan. Shigai Touno of *Team*, or Utage Kudan of the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"True identity? Kinda sounds weird. Ahaha, right, Ii-chan had trouble with people with many names. Since way back. No, it's not like one of them is the real one. Since Nacchan is all alone. If I had to say, right, Boku-sama-chan was the one to meet her first."

"And—after that, Mr. Fox."

"Right, *Mr. Fox*."

Kunagisa said.

"I will exclude the details, but when Boku-sama-chan was acting as a part of *Team*, kinda, it was like 'whack!', we fought against someone—it seems that was the one Ii-chan calls *Mr. Fox*. And at that time, Nacchan became a subordonate of his."

"So she was a traitor?"

"Rather than a traitor, a coward I guess. I will still exclude the details, but essentially, I had Nacchan act as a spy. Even after *Team* stopped functioning, Nacchan continued to act as a spy for some reason."

"For some reason..."

"No, since *Team* was no more, that action was not even spying... Well Boku-sama-chan didn't know until recently either, though. Kinda like 'Eh, is Nacchan still doing that?'"

"...That means, do you grasp the situation I'm in—did Touno-san tell you the main gist?"

"Nuh-uh. I didn't really ask and Nacchan didn't tell me anything either. I think it's clear if you look at Sacchan, but we don't all get along that well. But that said, Nacchan told me everything just earlier. I swear, speaking to no end when no one asked. She also tattled some unnecessary things to Ii-chan. I really feel like I got betrayed by Nacchan. Unmistakably. A coward being a traitor, huh?"

"..."

"That fox is bad. Right, that fox."

Uni, Kunagisa turned her neck.

Even though we were this high, there was no wind.

You could even call it windless.

That's scary.

Inversely scary.

The fox-masked man—Saitou Takashi.

Not only Aikawa-san and Magokoro—

That man also had a connection with Kunagisa Tomo.

I remember the time that the fox-masked man ambushed me in the underground parking lot. And even before that, originally—the first time I met that man was precisely **here**, wasn't it?

Kunagisa Tomo, *Dead Blue (The Verge of Death)*.

That's probably what the fox-masked man called *trial and error*, a passing point to reach the end of the world, the end of the Story. Of course, it wasn't a connection as firm as Aikawa-san's or Magokoro's...for the fox-masked man, it was already over. It would be the same whether it happened or not—but even then, now that it had come to it, it made me realize it even stronger.

The connection between Saitou Takashi and I.

Enemy.

Enemy—enemy, enemy, enemy.

As if...it was predestined.

As if there was no salvation.

No matter how much I struggled, would it have all been the same in the end?

"..."

...Nonsense.

That kind of thing—I'd thought about it many times.

I'd known it was true since Magokoro was introduced.

But, even then.

To be honest, I was ashamed of that thought.

Just Kunagisa.

Just Kunagisa—she was the one I didn't want to participate.

Kunagisa was the one I wanted to involve the least.

Even then—Kunagisa.

I wonder if, even then—if she would still tell me messed up things like being happy to get involved.

I wonder if she could still say such things.

At this time, to me.

To me.

"Well, originally, be it Nacchan, Sacchan or the rest, they were all people that I searched and looked for with the goal of being Ii-chan's successors. Every one of them had a screw loose somewhere, but even then, in the end, even if they were to all join their forces, they still couldn't rival Ii-chan. But that being said, even if they were failures, it doesn't change the fact that *Team* was Ii-chan's replacement. If you say that Ii-chan and *Mr. Fox* were absolutely destined to be enemies, then our *Team* affronting *Desert Fox* would be, well, natural or obvious I guess."

"My...replacement?"

"Even if I use the word 'replacement', they really ended up as failures. I told you, didn't I? Come on, Ii-chan's replacement? Now, thanks to all the rumors, they're described as some kind of terrorist legend, but in the end, they were a weakling army that couldn't even destroy a single world. Even though with Ii-chan, if we were to continue like before, far from the world, we could have even shattered the universe—we couldn't kill a fox, not even a lynx. In the end, Ii-chan's replacement—it was a role that couldn't be filled by anyone. Be it Nacchan, be it Sacchan, be it anyone else."

"That's not...really the case. Something like my replacement...although you phrase it like that, according to that Utsurigi jerk, it's something that can be achieved very easily. Now I finally feel like I understood why Utsurigi was so persistent on my case, but—"

"Aah, I see. Is that so, so that's what that was. But that was just jealousy. How tiny, unbefitting of Sacchan. According to me, it's clear; no one can be Ii-chan's replacement."

Kunagisa said faintly.

As if singing pi's decimals, faintly.

"There are two reasons. Want to know?"

"..."

"The first one, this is really simple. First, they would need to be loved by Boku-sama-chan, right? That is impossible for anyone but Ii-chan. I like everybody, but—I only love Ii-chan."

Kunagisa seemed to smile a little.

I couldn't bear to look into her eyes.

I couldn't bear to look—to look at that smile.

I couldn't look.

"And the second one—as a reason, this one is much more conclusive. If someone wants to stand next to Boku-sama-chan, in the place where Ii-chan stood, they would need to hate me from the bottom of their heart." Kunagisa said. "That, Sacchan or Nacchan—they could absolutely never do it."

"I—"

My chest hurt.

There was no wind.

I briefly looked down at the ground.

It was too...small.

The world looked small.

Tiny.

"I like you."

"Like."

"Yeah, like."

"How much do you like Boku-sama-chan?"

"To the point I could die."

"Then, how much do you hate me?"

That's...as if.

As if those questions could just be casually stringed together.

"How much does Ii-chan hate Kunagisa Tomo? How much does Ii-chan hate the Boku-sama-chan, who turned your life into the worst? How much does Ii-chan hate the Boku-sama-chan, who turned your sister into a mere pile of strained lees? How much do you hate the Boku-sama-chan who stalled Ii-chan when he was a boy drenched in sin and corruption, a boy who would have definitely led a better life if we hadn't met?"

"...Tomo—"

"Do you hate me to the point you could die?"

"—I."

"Well, you should hate me to the point you could kill me or to the point you could break me, thinking normally."

...You.

You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?

Utsurigi Gaisuke's...Nonsense Killing.

However, because that man always talked in a clever way and addressed me as skillfully as if he was my reflection in a mirror, though I couldn't believe that at first glance—

Since nonsense is a means to hide truth.

Truth is therefore a means to kill nonsense.

"Even then—"

Now, for the first time.

Kunagisa's words were filled with something akin to emotion.

"Ii-chan won't—hate **me** or abandon **me**[1]—right?"

That—that emotion.

You could probably call it anger.

It was called indignation.

"Why?"

"Even if...you ask that."

I couldn't answer.

There was no way I could answer something like that.

...No, that's false.

It's not that I couldn't answer, I already did.

Because I—I like you.

Because I like you.

I like you, so I can't detest you.

I like you, so I can't go against you.

It's just that.

---

[1] Here she uses the pronoun "boku" instead of her usual "boku-sama-chan."

It's just something that easy to understand.

Since that day.

Ever since that day when we first met, but...

Kunagisa was probably not satisfied with that answer.

This was not the answer Kunagisa requested.

Kunagisa didn't request—

Something this vague and unclear.

At Shadou Kyouichirou's research facilities—at that time, the smile appearing on Kunagisa's face when looking at that corpse drenched in blood.

Since that day, it began.

No,

In reality, it had already begun since the day we met.

Isn't it obvious?

"Hey, answer. Why? Why doesn't Ii-chan hate Boku-sama-chan? Even though, if you hated Boku-sama-chan, this would be really, really easy."

"Mo-more importantly than that."

I—

I didn't want to use nonsense against Kunagisa there.

Even now, I was still bad at giving up.

That's why I changed the topic.

Changed.

But, this was already a dead end.

The destinations it could change to were limited.

Everywhere I could change it to—they were all dead ends.

"Tomo. You—you will die soon, I heard."

"..."

"I heard that you could die any second now. Touno-san said so. Is that the truth?"

"Yes, it's true."

Kunagisa agreed normally.

Not putting a bold front, but not messing around either.

Very normally.

As if she had known for a long time.

"Really...Nacchan is a big gossiper, what a problem. Even though her lips being shut to the point of cowardice was my favorite part of her, even though it was the part that resembled Ii-chan the most. Really, she did something unnecessary. In the end, a replacement is a replacement, an imitation is an imitation; it cannot become the real thing. A complete alternative doesn't exist, it can't exist. I will say it again and again, but Ii-chan really is irreplaceable."

"I don't care about that—no one cares about me. Don't talk about me. So, what was it? Why didn't you tell me? You—intended to die without telling me? If Touno hadn't told me—would I have not known anything until **everything** was over?"

Like six years ago.

Outside the loop, until **everything** was over.

In the center of the world and outside the loop.

Ignorance by subjective symptoms.

Knowing your height, but not your place.

That kind of idea—

Would it apply again?

Of course, I already knew that.

I already understood that.

That Kunagisa would die someday.

That she was an ephemeral girl to begin with.

That her just living in the moment was a miracle.

"Didn't you already know?"

Kunagisa, as if seeing right through me,

Was probably smiling.

As if looking at a corpse.

"At the very least, Ii-chan should have known. For Boku-sama-chan, from the start, it was unnatural to be alive. Like forcing something wrong to

live. Like making an immortal girl who lived for centuries continue to live forever, an existence that shouldn't exist—didn't you already know that? These blue hairs are proof of recessiveness."

That's right, I knew it.

What dying was.

What living was.

If you live to die, then—

How unnatural being alive is.

When your existence is like that—

Just living feels like dying.

Of course, he never said it in front of his beloved little sister, he could not bring himself to, but casually, when we found ourselves alone, her brother, Kunagisa Nao, without any deep emotion, with real wonder, tilted his head and said to himself.

'Why does my sister—not die?'

That was probably a statement enveloped in its shell.

Because it was the weak and strong Nao-san who never said his true thoughts even to himself, by restraining his unconscious, he could say it in a roundabout way.

In reality, what he thought was,

Why does my little sister keep living?

In reality, that was common—

Not especially cruel, a common opinion.

Anytime, at any age—just looking at Kunagisa's clinical records, which were thirty billion times thicker than those of a normal person, anyone would lose their words at that abnormality.

And so I thought.

Why was she alive?

So, it wasn't anything unnatural at all.

Just dying.

She was just dying.

Kunagisa Tomo—she was just dying.

As natural as the fact that the world will die out one day.

Like the fact that the world will end someday.

Like the fact that the Story will end someday.

Even though it's just one girl dying—

Even then, why was it so...

Even though I ran away.

Even though...I once ran away from that fact.

Kunagisa Tomo dies.

She can be broken.

I can break her.

I can kill her—despite having run away from that fact.

Although she was already a girl easily able to die,

Even though I made it easier for her to die...

"I will say something unnecessary, but—it's not Ii-chan's fault. This is something—something that was decided from way back. At the very least, Boku-sama-chan knew it from the start. Look, I think it was in August, I told you, didn't I? That it looks like it will soon be dangerous. I properly put out some foreshadowing, because if I suddenly died, Ii-chan would be surprised."

"But—"

I wouldn't just be surprised.

I mean, after that.

You said it, didn't you?

That you would be fine now.

That, from now on, everything would be fine.

"Aah...that. Yes, that, that, I failed a little, what a blunder Boku-sama-chan did. How embarrassing, how embarrassing. Thinking about it now, it was really unnecessary. I gave Ii-chan unnecessary hope—also..."

Kunagisa said.

"I made you see a dream you didn't want to."

"..."

"At first, you know, I intended to withdraw it immediately. It's a lie, in reality I will die very soon—I wanted to tell you lightly. But you see—

"Ii-chan was delighted."

Kunagisa seemed sad.

She may be crying, I thought.

However, she probably wasn't.

Kunagisa Tomo could not cry.

Like how I could not smile.

Even if tears flowed, in reality, she wouldn't be crying.

"I didn't think Ii-chan would be delighted."

"..."

"I intended it to be my last mean-spirited joke—I thought that, if Boku-sama-chan stayed forever at Ii-chan's side, Ii-chan would hate it."

"That I...would hate it."

"I thought it was a lie. Though I'm sorry." Kunagisa said. "Although Ii-chan says a lot of things through his words and attitude, I thought that Ii-chan had to hate me from the bottom of his heart. Although Boku-sama-chan believed Ii-chan, I just believed you, be it truths or lies. I didn't think it was true."

"...Tomo."

"Even if Ii-chan says that he likes Boku-sama-chan, I could believe it, but I couldn't think it was the truth."

"You really...have no faith in me. I feel like the boy who cried wolf."

"The boy who cried wolf lied about there being wolves, didn't he? Ii-chan lied about there not being wolves. That difference, although it looks trivial, is decisive."

"But...I..."

"Yes. That was a real reaction, Boku-sama-chan was surprised. Setting like and hate aside, it was very surprising for Ii-chan to be glad. Setting like and hate aside, at the very least, Ii-chan thought it was fine for Boku-sama-chan to be at his side."

"Isn't that obvious?"

As expected—some irritation started to mix in my words.

I was frustrated that she thought such things.

No, it's not like I couldn’t understand.

Being trusted or—being forgiven.

Unconditional trust and unconditional forgiveness.

It was a fact that I couldn't bear this and that Kunagisa did. In the end, these kinds of emotions reflected straight back to me—and naturally, it became a vicious circle.

What was obvious?

Even if my words reached Kunagisa—

My feelings didn't reach her.

That kind of thing, for Kunagisa—

Whether they reached her or not, it was the same.

Thinking about it, I was awfully laughable.

The truth coming from the bottom of my heart,

And the fiction that came out from my tongue,

Were heard as one and the same.

When you reach those extremities, the things you trust and the things you doubt—don’t they become equal and interchangeable?

That's why—why I don't like it.

Being trusted.

Being forgiven.

I don't like it.

"The proposal made me glad. Even if it was a lie, even if it was the truth. Honestly, it wasn't that realistic—I mean, I don't think Ii-chan can conduct

himself in the Kunagisa Syndicate at this point—but, even then, pleasant things make me glad. To the point I could die."

"...Nothing can be done about it?"

I said.

I said, trying to struggle.

"Can't something be done to lengthen your life? Mobilizing all of the Kunagisa Syndicate's power, wouldn't it be possible? If it's outside of your field, I can deceive the *Killing Names* or the *Cursing Names* and bring them here. Also, even without having someone save you, with your knowledge, couldn't you think of a way to avoid death?"

"Mmm."

I knew that I was asking for the impossible. If there was such a way, she would have done it long ago. Am I a kid, I thought. Am I just a hopeless, intolerant, unreasonable kid that strays his eyes away from the truth?

Not knowing the consequences.

Not knowing the limits.

But that was the same for Kunagisa too.

Then...

"Well, kinda."

Kunagisa said unusually evasively.

"How should I say it—I don't know what Nacchan told you, but because my body is now able to construct itself, it is not incorrect to say that 'I can die at any second' on a whole other level than before. But even then, from what Boku-sama-chan can calculate, for two or three years—I could continue living I guess."

"Can you?!"

"..."

To my enthusiasm, Kunagisa answered with silence.

That reminded me.

Not being able to look Kunagisa in the eyes.

I hadn't been able to face her for a while.

While being next to each other—

Because we were next to each other.

We couldn’t face each other.

We couldn’t face each other, being adjacent.

The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User.

"It means it's not zero, Ii-chan." Kunagisa cut the silence after about ten seconds and said. "Listen well, Ii-chan."

"What is it?"

"Zero point..."

Kunagisa

Took plenty of time to prepare her words,

"Zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero, three. The rest abridged."

She said.

"..."

"Not percent. Rate."

The decimal—it was wrong?

Here, again?

"Of course, it comes with its own price. Being this close to the end, I definitely wouldn't be able to escape unhurt. My unbalanced talent would probably become even more unbalanced, yes, to the extent where it would no longer be that much of a talent. My intellect would fall to the point of being rightfully called dim-witted. The restraints—the shackles and chains that I wore until now would be far from enough, and I would only be able to drag Ii-chan down. First, I would probably lose most of my sight, and my hair would also become dark. Less than a commoner."

"..."

"Even paying that much of a price, the probability remains just that. It's a strict calculation without favoritism, but now I think I should have been softer with the calculation."

Then, Kunagisa said "Yes.", as if confirming her own words.

She then continued once more.

"...But you know. Ii-chan, well, it's only a supposition but—Boku-sama-chan could probably clear a probability of that level. I don't know if Boku-sama-chan were alone, but if Ii-chan were at my side, I could."

"..."

"Because Ii-chan has really bad luck."

"...Then."

"But, if Ii-chan wants me to live, that's now impossible. I can only die." Kunagisa said. "It was a bet—Nacchan went somewhere, probably to Ii-chan's place, but I didn't stop her, thinking that Ii-chan may not come here. If that proposal and you being that glad were just one of Ii-chan's lies, Boku-sama-chan may have been able to survive, I thought."

Kunagisa looked toward me.

Not in a resentful way.

But,

That sight blamed me.

That alone.

As if saying that that alone was my fault.

"If—"

Kunagisa continued.

Not changing her tone.

Depending on how you listened, she might have seemed listless.

"If Ii-chan really, from the bottom of his heart, no, not even the bottom, it can be the sides or the top, of course even the middle—if Ii-chan could hate Boku-sama-chan even a little, if even an ounce of falsehood was mixed into that proposal, well, though it was not realistic, we may have been able to marry."

"..."

"Though we probably couldn't have had kids."

Who...could have foreseen it?

Who in the world could have foreseen it?

That the Nonsense User boy—
That he really liked the blue girl.

Without any distortion.
Simply.
Straightforwardly, to the point he could smile.
Wholeheartedly, to the point he could become sad.
I really liked...Kunagisa Tomo.
To the point I couldn't bring myself to hate her.
To the point of not being able to hate her.
To an unimaginable point.
I really liked her.
Ever since six years ago.
Without any interruption until today.
Without any change until today.
At first, it was revenge.
At first...it was revenge, but...
Until the end, it was revenge, but...
From the beginning to the end, I liked her.
Even if everything else was a lie, that alone was the truth.
Even if everything was a lie, that alone was the truth.
Even if that was a lie, it was true.
There were no wolves.
There were no wolves anywhere.
I continued to say that.
I continued to scream that.
Until my voice became hoarse and my throat was crushed.
Then this was it—the natural result.
It was all undeniable, pre-established harmony.
Destiny and—the Story.

An obvious conclusion.

"As if...as if your life and death would be determined by my luck. Not just for you—for anything and everything, stop making me the reason, stop making me the grounds. It's heavy. It's too heavy. Your trust and your forgiveness—they are too heavy for me to bear."

"Hahah."

Kunagisa laughed out loud.

"It's kinda weird. Thinking about it, this is the first time we've ever talked seriously like this."

"..."

"I feel like we always talked about meaningless and worthless things. Without any content, the kinds of trivial things that will all be forgotten seconds later, those kinds of chats. Although we've known each for such a long time."

"Was it...long?"

I had thought that.

But—

I didn't think that any longer.

"Well, the blank periods were too long, and also, Boku-sama-chan is a hikikomori, so we haven't actually interacted that much."

"But—"

I said.

"Inside me, your existence is too big."

"...Hmm."

"To the point I could throw everything else away."

Those were my true thoughts.

At this point, that was what I truly thought.

Without any deception, without any nonsense, my true thoughts.

It was true that, during the past six years, I had made myself a lot of other things that I wanted to protect, but that didn't change the fact that you are at the top.

That much could not change.
There could be no permutation.
For Kunagisa, I could throw everything away.
If Kunagisa wished for it,

I would kill anyone.

Even Miiko-san, even Aikawa-san.
Even Houko-chan, even Emoto-san.
I would kill anyone.
If Kunagisa wished for it, I would kill them.
I would abandon anything.
Like—like that demonic killer.
In small pieces.
Without leaving a fragment, in pieces.
I would kill anyone.
I could kill anyone.
I could kill the people I love without any hesitation.
And I find—
I find myself proud of it.
I have no embarrassment nor guilt.
I think that.
For me, Kunagisa was—everything.
Kunagisa Tomo was perfect.
I know...that.
"Being perfect wasn't good."
Kunagisa said.
Again, as if reading my heart.
"Being perfect is insipid."
"..."

"That's why Boku-sama-chan needed flaws. I needed caution. I needed shackles. I needed—chains." Kunagisa said. "Absolutely, critically. And more than anything, I needed a scabbard."

"...Scabbard...me?"

"In reality, I wanted to bring that to the coffin with me—but well, for the occasion, to save Nacchan's face, I could tell you just in case. At the very least, Boku-sama-chan was not essential for Ii-chan, but Ii-chan was essential for Boku-sama-chan."

"Why—"

Of course I knew.

Kunagisa couldn't live alone.

Because of that unbalanced talent, there were too many flaws and too many lacking parts—her existence was not compatible with everyday life. She needed someone like me or *Team*'s Utsurigi or Touno-san at her side to support her small body.

But,

If it was as she had said earlier.

If those flaws were shackles and chains that she put on herself—the story was completely different. Even if one cannot pretend to have physical abnormalities, for psychological ones—

"Liar."

Kunagisa said.

"If we're talking about liars, Boku-sama-chan is probably much more fit to bear that title than Ii-chan."

"...What do you mean?"

"Ufufu. I can't use nonsense like Ii-chan. Boku-sama-chan can only use straightforward words, so being a Nonsense User is only for Ii-chan, but in terms of being a liar, Boku-sama-chan is one or two levels above. I mean—"

Kunagisa's body lightly swayed.

She moved her weight to the front.

I thought she would fall at this rate.

However,

Her hands were firmly gripping the fence.

Not falling.

Not falling—yet.

We were still in the middle of the talk.

"Ii-chan cannot fool himself, but Boku-sama-chan can even fool herself."

Boku-sama-chan lies to herself.

Kunagisa said that.

"As a liar, isn't that high-end?"

"...Yeah. It's like a secret final technique."

Lying to yourself unconsciously—

Everyone does that.

Like I have been doing usually.

However—intentionally.

If you can lie to your mind consciously.

That is closer to hypnosis rather than lies.

For example,

If there was someone who could, as if manipulating chopsticks in their right hand,

Manage their own mind and memory—

If someone were able to do it.

That would be the final form of a liar.

That kind of thing—

It would be impossible for anyone except Kunagisa, who possessed enormous memory and concentration and cognition ability.

For that Kunagisa—

Why in the world—

Why would something like that be necessary?

Willfully coiling yourself with chains.

Gladly coiling yourself with chains.

"I needed a weakness."

Kunagisa said.

"I needed frailness. I needed feebleness. I needed flaws. I needed defects."

I wanted frailness.

I wanted feebleness.

I wanted flaws.

I wanted defects.

I wanted...weakness.

"Long ago, Boku-sama-chan was wrong."

"Long ago—how long ago was it?"

"When I was just born."

Kunagisa said without any particular nostalgia.

As if talking from a memory that she couldn't recall.

"I was quite clever. I understood immediately. That this—this was not the world Boku-sama-chan should have been born in."

"Aah, I screwed up."

"—You say it like you took the wrong path."

"Yes. It's like I confused the right and left at the first corner. Well, left and right switch depending on the way you are facing, so either one may have been fine, but I screwed up. I failed. Ii-chan often said that his life was a succession of errors and failures, but even then. Even if that were true, Ii-chan being born in this world in itself was not an error."

"That's not the case."

"That's totally the case. And it is not...for Boku-sama-chan. The very first thing was wrong. Therefore, in Boku-sama-chan's case, my life was just trying to make up for that screw up. The last nineteen years, no, now it's nearly twenty, huh? If I make it there."

"I understand...that you are not compatible with this world. It's obvious that you exceed enough for that—"

"Incompatible. But thinking about it, those words seem like lies. More straightforwardly, I should say the other side of the world maybe."

"...Isn't it inevitable?"

I said nonchalantly.

The Kunagisa House.

Thinking about the character of the Kunagisa Syndicate, it was inevitable.

Ichigai, Nishiori, Sanzaka, Shikabane, Gotoride, Rokugase, skipping the seventh name, Hachikiri, and the Kunagisa Syndicate consolidating them.

Outside and guidebook, evergreen and corpse, fortress and shackles, and the limit towards the shore[2].

Those are, in other words, cursing words.

That is the reason why the seventh is missing.

Kunagisa Tomo—she was purebred.

Chaste, and purebred.

In that sense, you could say everyone and everything around the Kunagisa Syndicate was for Kunagisa Tomo's sake.

Her blue hair was the proof of recessiveness.

Those blue hairs were forever sought after.

Aah, I see.

Therefore, chains.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Omokage Magokoro.

And including Aikawa Jun, their genesis is the same.

The root was exactly the same.

Just, unlike Aikawa-san and Magokoro who were created intentionally and self-righteously by just one man, Kunagisa—she was an existence produced without anyone's intent, by pure coincidence, in an error of probabilities—an existence by no means inferior to the long, long, eternal history.

---

[2] Listing the second kanji in the names, with the first ones being the archaic form of numbers 1 to 9.

Monster.

Apparition.

Foreign body.

Birthed by history—

Birthed by the world, a hidden side of the world.

A self-paradox.

But, being perfect.

Being called perfect in this world.

"Perfection is wrong."

Kunagisa said quietly.

"That's why Boku-sama-chan was yearning for someone else. If I didn't, I wouldn't have been able to live. This personality—"

This personality, too, is artificial.

This personality, too, is an imitation.

"This is the most suitable personality for living, which I designed myself. The sample was Ii-chan's little sister, wasn't it? But, well, Ii-chan's sister and the other kids' personalities weren't stabilized yet at that point. Just kidding, Boku-sama-chan! Or something."

When was it again?

I compared Hime-chan to Kunagisa.

By saving Hime-chan just as much as I couldn't save Kunagisa six years ago, I once tried to compensate for it.

Because Kunagisa resembled Hime-chan.

But naturally, Hime-chan didn't know Kunagisa.

They had never met.

So in the end, that—that was the personality I couldn't leave alone the most. The personality Hime-chan had was, to put it bluntly, just an act—that wasn't Hime-chan herself.

That was just how Hime-chan dealt with the world.

However,

Kunagisa Tomo as well,

Wasn't her Original, in a pure sense.
Her, who wasn't a person—
Needed a personality as a humanoid.
My little sister was a part of that.
That kind of thing—
That kind of thing, I knew it.
I already knew it six years ago.
It was a common story.
Because it was a common story.
But, what was cruel in Kunagisa Tomo's case—
Was that it wasn't how she dealt with the world, not an act.
Being natural.
Being someone else.
Having nothing else.
Because—

She was empty.

She was empty, so she needed a husk.
It was just that.
She needed an install.
She needed a reboot—after the install.
"So. A husk, and chains."
Kunagisa said little by little, grumbling.
"Boku-sama-chan was always, from the start, yearning for Ii-chan. For an irreplaceable Ii-chan. To the point that anything else, even the world, was unnecessary."
"Well...I'm like a lump of flaws after all. Perfect for the flawless you. For you, whose flaw is to have no flaws—"
Baby bird.
Those were Nao-san's words.

But Kunagisa was too much—

To just be a baby bird.

"Ii-chan. Do you like Boku-sama-chan?"

"...As I said, I like you."

"Boku-sama-chan, you see."

Kunagisa said.

"I like Ii-chan."

"..."

"From the very start, Ii-chan was my ideal."

I was searching for **someone like Ii-chan**.

There was none—no replacement.

I wanted someone.

Someone with whom I could turn the whole world against me—

I yearned for it.

I wanted a friend.

"...Then weren't you disappointed? That the one you ended up meeting was like that."

"Nuh-uh. You were better than I imagined."

"More full of flaws than you imagined?"

"Yes."

"Don't agree with me there."

"Ra. Ther." Kunagisa chose her words for a bit. "There wasn't anyone but Ii-chan. **Humans** who reached Boku-sama-chan, who broke the guard of the Kunagisa Syndicate and reached Boku-sama-chan, there was no one except Ii-chan. Even *Green Green Green*, Utsurigi Gaisuke—even that professional of destruction and destruction and destruction, I was the one to call out to him."

"It's...by chance."

Right, by chance.

The fact that I reached the Kunagisa Syndicate's center—if you want to express it as something other than chance, it couldn't be anything else than an inevitability, an unavoidable inevitability.

It was just self-abandonment.

It was just complete desperation.

I crossed many and many dangerous bridges.

I didn't even think about testing the waters before crossing.

If that was the only means to contact the Kunagisa Syndicate—it's the same thing as there being no means.

Also...

In the end, I relied on Nao-san.

That place.

Nao-san was the one to guide me to that sandbox.

My meeting with Kunagisa—

The meeting between the despicable boy and the blue girl,

Was staged by the girl's brother.

I wonder,

With what feelings did Nao-san...

Have me meet Kunagisa.

His beloved little sister—

And me, who lost my little sister.

"Boku-sama-chan only had Ii-chan."

"That's why I absolutely didn't want to let Ii-chan go."

"..."

"That's why I cursed Ii-chan."

Kunagisa said that line really quietly.

"I bound you with curses."

Curses—

A cursing chain.

"Because Ii-chan is a good person."

"A good person?"

"In reality, a good person. In reality, a kind person. If I had to put it into words, it would be really cliché, but yeah, well, that's exactly it, that phrase. In reality, a kind man, the Nonsense User, Ii-chan."

"Why...does everyone say things like that? To this warped and useless me."

"It's simple. Because you really are a kind and good person. Because you are a really kind and good person."

"How much better would this all have been, if that was the case."

"I mean, if that wasn't the case—you wouldn't have been able to stay that long with Boku-sama-chan."

From the sandbox, to the roof.

"As I said before, I am a little mad that you ran away midway through, but even then, Ii-chan came back. Even if it wasn't for Boku-sama-chan's sake, you came back, didn't you?"

"In reality, I wanted to stay with you from the crib to the cemetery. I screwed up. But that being said, with this conclusion, it's roughly the same."

The sandbox being the crib and the roof being the cemetery.

I guess that was typical of Kunagisa Tomo.

Not knowing what she was thinking about, a husk.

Having thought about everything, an empty body.

And—

Looking up, the vast sky.

How much did we talk?

The eastern side faintly started to become white.

That light couldn't be blocked by anyone.

Nowhere.

High.

This was surely—surely the highest place.

Like a gravestone.

"I needed Ii-chan no matter what. Ii-chan was the only thing I couldn't hand over to anyone. I couldn't hand you to Nao-kun nor to Micchan. And naturally, not to the world either."

To something like the world.

I couldn't give up Ii-chan.

That's—

The feelings of a young and pure genius.

Her only request.

She didn't wish for anything else.

Her only prayer.

Her feelings and requests and wishes and prayers—

Only accumulated to that.

A dream.

That was a dream.

The blue girl who was born in the wrong world—the blue girl who was like an error in the Story, the blue girl who found even living difficult, the one called a Savant was earnestly dreaming of that reality.

Therefore,

Therefore, it didn't come true one bit.

How laughable.

As if, in front of me, that kind of hope would come true.

There was no way it would.

Even though...I shouldn't have done that.

If only—if only I didn't exist.

If I didn't exist, Kunagisa would have been somewhat happy, spending her life inside the Kunagisa Syndicate's walls, in the husk she created herself.

Even though she could have been reasonably happy.

I...but...

Even then, I wanted to save her.

That...wasn't a lie.

And Kunagisa too—she didn't want something so moderate.

In the end, she had the temperament of a genius.

From way back, and probably even now.

She wasn't searching for anything other than the absolute.

So.

The mechanical girl ended.

The girl about to break—she broke.

I was the one to both end her and break her.

No matter what anyone said.

Even if Kunagisa forgave me, I couldn't forgive myself.

"It's Boku-sama-chan's fault that Boku-sama-chan broke."

However—

Kunagisa said that.

"There was some absurdity in the settings. Boku-sama-chan was wrong for trying to put an unpredictable factor like Ii-chan under my control. So I assertively tried to force Ii-chan to take the lead, but it turns out a Nonsense User is only one because he cannot handle the grasp of leadership.. Ah, err, it was Micchan, wasn't he? The first one to call Ii-chan a Nonsense User.

"Mm...in this case, he 'read it', I guess."

"Either way of saying it is fine."

"Yes. Either way, it is splendid. Micchan, who gave the symbol of the Nonsense User to a natural-born Nonsense User, did a splendid job. A nickname worth a thousand gold coins. Errr, was it onomastic again?"

"Your...*Blue Savant* was delivered by that person too, huh."

"Yeah, that was good. But he went a little too far with the *Dead Blue* after that. It was well received amongst my comrades, but, umm, but well, even those comrades had titles such as *Green Green Green* or *Trigger Happy-End*."

"Apart from that...err, what was there again? I feel like I've heard them before. *Double Flick*, *Reverse Cross*, *Cubic Loop*, *Dancing With Madness*, *Cheetah*

and *Bad Kind*, was it? I forgot their names though... Looking at it, *Chiikun* looks strangely normal."

"You see, Chiikun, he had no interest in names. His name was Ayaminami Hyou, so it became Cheetah, it's that simple."

"Hyou should be a panther, shouldn't it?"

"Sacchan made that retort with an absurdly nice and enthusiastic smile."

"Uwaaa..."

I wouldn't even want to see that from the side...

"'I would gladly let an expert in animals like you manage the investigation work,' with that, Chiikun specialized in seeking."

"So it was a pun?"

"But—his senses were the best. If it was for that, maybe I should have given a proper name to *Team*. If it was Micchan, I wonder how he would have named our *Team*..."

"..."

Ayaminami Hyou.

Even after *Team* was dissolved—

He still lived in a prison, being relied upon by Kunagisa Tomo.

"Well...I much prefer *Blue Savant* over *Dead Blue* too. *Dead* is scary and unbearable."

"Yes. It had failed from the start. There was no way to create it—to create Ii-chan's imitation. Everything was useless. Ahaha, I did a bad thing to everyone. Well, Nacchan and Sacchan and Chiikun all had fun, so I don't really need to apologize, but even then, Boku-sama-chan made some fine adults accompany me for my model building, for my miniature garden building. Well...to be precise, that was just for killing time."

"...Killing time?"

"Oops. My mouth slipped. Umm, as I thought, it's difficult to talk seriously with Ii-chan. I can't grasp the timing. To be honest, I had quite a lot of serious talks with Jun-chan, but—um, but, well, killing time."

"..."

I once confronted Utsurigi Gaisuke with questions. Why did Kunagisa Tomo do it—why did she create *Team* and act like a terrorist? Why did the Savant become the Dead? Why in the world did she impose that on herself at that time?

Utsurigi answered.

Because...

Because she wished for it...?

That's...

"Killing time."

Kunagisa repeated.

"Killing time until Ii-chan came back from the ER3 System."

"...So you thought I would return."

"I didn't think you would drop out, though. But that way was better. I planned on waiting ten years, but *Team* lost nearly half of its lifetime with *Fox*'s appearance."

"...It seems that Mr. Fox eroded more into your life than I thought. Well, for that person, it was just something trivial, so it's dubious whether he even remembers that..."

Rather, no matter how much of a *connection* there was with Jun-san and Magokoro, if he knew, he would have touched a bit on it. The fox-masked man probably didn't know that *The Verge of Death* controlling *Team* was Kunagisa Tomo.

Umm.

Maybe she wasn't that famous.

Then the question became why Iria-san knew about that...

Was it related to the circumstances of that island?

"Ii-chan came back. As expected."

"..."

"He came back to meet Boku-sama-chan." Kunagisa said. "His dead friend and Boku-sama-chan overlapped. That was the reason why he

dropped out, right? Ufufu, in that sense, Boku-sama-chan properly had Ii-chan in the palm of my hands."

"In the palm—"

"Ii-chan is...

“No matter who he looks at, he can only think about Boku-sama-chan."

"No matter who he likes or hates, everything is compared to Boku-sama-chan. How is that person similar to Kunagisa Tomo, how are they not similar to Kunagisa Tomo, that evaluation comes first—Boku-sama-chan is too absolute to be comparable, but at the same time is the evaluation basis for comparison."

"..."

"Ii-chan loves Boku-sama-chan. He couldn't live without Boku-sama-chan."

Kunagisa Tomo not existing—

Was the same as no one existing.

Was the same as me not existing.

Then maybe that wasn’t something on the level of like or hate.

Like the air.

Like water.

Like the sky.

Like the sun—the same as that.

"...Is that your curse?"

"Yes!"

Kunagisa agreed with all her might.

"That's right, Ii-chan."

"..."

"Ii-chan, do you like the air?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like water?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like the sky?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like the sun?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like—Kunagisa Tomo?"

"...I don't know."

I said.

The same words I once told Utsurigi.

"You... What in the world do you want to hear from me? What are you trying to make me say? Tomo... What do you want me to say? Should I say that I hate you? If I hated you, would you be satisfied? If that's the case—

"Could you properly die?"

Without any regret.

Being able to die peacefully?

At the very least, for her death to be peaceful.

"That may be the case."

Kunagisa answered, as if she really didn't care.

As if saying she had no interest in that.

That she had no interest or concern,

Towards her dying.

"If that were the case, would Ii-chan hate me? If Boku-sama-chan requested that Ii-chan hate me?"

"If you're fine with a lie."

"As I said, be it the truth or a lie, it doesn't matter. If Ii-chan says it then I will believe anything."

I—

If it is Kunagisa Tomo, anything is fine.

"If it is Ii-chan, anything is fine."

"..."

"Aah, you don't need to think seriously about it. That was just a question, a problem. I wanted to ask, just in case. You don't need to worry, that's not my intent. At this point, Boku-sama-chan's mood is the last thing I am concerned about. Because moods can be changed to anything. Right, if I had to die—I want to die after suffering a lot. I want to feel like I am living."

Feeling...that I am alive.

Those words,

I heard them strangely.

They reasoned bizarrely.

As if...that was some kind of keyword.

Because I was living as if I was dead?

No, not that, it was something else—

Magokoro.

In this case—Omokage, Magokoro.

The Orange Seed.

That orange friend...

"Pain is the proof of being alive. For your heart or your body, if wounds come with pain, then being hurt isn't that bad, is it?"

Pain.

In other words, being alive.

Being in contact with the world.

Being connected.

"That's why Boku-sama-chan is only thinking about Ii-chan."

"About...me."

"So you know. In reality, I wanted to quickly reveal the secret and enjoy the remainder of my life playfully with Ii-chan, like in a cancelled manga's ending, but Ii-chan..."

"..."

"Ii-chan was delighted."

He was really...delighted.

Even though I thought he would be disappointed—he was delighted.

Even though I intended it to be a trivial mean joke.

Even though I intended it to be a final mean joke.

I was being playful, and failed.

I failed at the end.

Kunagisa said.

"Therefore, I am thinking about giving a reward to Ii-chan, now. Because Nacchan set the stage, I decided to release Ii-chan."

"Release...what?"

"Boku-sama-chan's things will stay at Boku-sama-chan's side—that's Boku-sama-chan's doctrine, but I can't really take them to the other world. Even then, I am thinking about at least taking those memories with me, but... Yes. I was hesitating until now, I really couldn't decide—if possible, I wanted to wait until the time was up. Those were Boku-sama-chan's true thoughts...but now I just decided."

"For Ii-chan, I will release even the memories here."

"...Why?"

"As I said, I'm releasing you. Releasing. I will lift the curse. The curse that Boku-sama-chan continuously put on Ii-chan everyday for the past six years."

Kunagisa said.

"Boku-sama-chan cursed Ii-chan over and over so that he would be Boku-sama-chan's, making him unable to see anyone but Boku-sama-chan, making him unable to hear anyone but Boku-sama-chan. I will release that.

I will release you of those chains.

So—after that, do as you like."

"Do...as I like, you say."

"You have people you want to save, don't you? You have people you want to protect, don't you? You have a lot of important people—important people apart from Boku-sama-chan, don't you? Then Ii-chan needs to cherish them. Help them, protect them, cherish them."

"But compared to you, they—"

"You don't need to compare anymore."

"...But...now, everything is over. The fight with Mr. Fox is already over. That person already said he won't lay a hand on me. So—"

"It's not finished at all."

Kunagisa said.

It's not finished at all.

That...may have been the case.

Shigai Touno—Utage Kudan, what she said to Kunagisa, how much she explained things, I didn't know...but certainly... It wasn't over.

Furuyari Zukin.

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Those events at the Imperial Garden—

That tragedy was only a few hours ago.

"It's not finished at all."

"But Tomo. For me, you are...way more important than the world, the Story or any of that spiritualism and fodder science and fodder philosophy—"

"Hmm. So...

"So would you die with me?"

As if that...

That was abrupt, as if that was her true feelings.

"Jumping from here with Boku-sama-chan."

Kunagisa fluttered her legs.

One hundred and forty meters above the ground.

No wind.

As usual, no wind.

As if saying that it was impossible to fall by accident.

"Throwing everything away. Sacrificing the rest of the world, abandoning everyone around us, jumping from here and dying with Boku-sama-chan?"

"..."

"I would be glad if Ii-chan would die with me."

I—

I thought.

I thought about a lot of things.

About everything up to now.

About that sandbox.

About six years ago. About the blue boy. About the blue girl. About playing innocently—in the middle of the Kunagisa Syndicate. About resolving myself to fight the world. About losing against the world. About running away. About encountering the same fate in my next destination. About coming back. About going to meet her. About everything after that.

About the roof.

About Kunagisa, about everything.

About the course from before to now.

The difference—the difference between before and now.

The error between now and before.

I thought.

I desperately thought.

And...I.

I looked at her.

Beside me,

The girl, beside me as if it were natural,

Sitting pleasantly beside me.

She, too, looked at me.

For the first time in a long time,

For the first time in six years, I felt like I met Kunagisa Tomo.

And I said.

I answered—her question.

"No way."

I answered her feelings.

"I cannot do that."

"...Uni."

Kunagisa,

Looked disappointed from the bottom of her heart.

"The battery—it ran out."

"...Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Sorry... Really, sorry. I didn't mind throwing everything away for your sake...I didn't mind dying, but... Now, I cannot—I cannot die. I..."

I.

I said with resolve and determination.

"I don't want to die."

Right, Kunagisa lightly accepted.

I received her words from the front.

"Then...at the very least." Then she said. "The friend Ii-chan sees Boku-sama-chan in...save her."

"...Did you hear about that from Touno-san?"

"Even if I hadn't, I would notice. The Orange Seed—professor Kyouichirou was quite conscious about that."

But...

Save her.

Save her, what did she mean?

Although Magokoro was now fine.

Although she should...have been fine.

"...Promise me, Ii-chan. That you will at least protect that friend."

"..."

"In the end, Ii-chan couldn't protect or save his little sister or Boku-sama-chan—he couldn't even take his revenge or his vengeance, but unrelated to that—"

"Yeah, I swear."

I—I will set Magokoro free.

That was what I decided.

I will release her.

From various chains.

"I promise. At least that."

"Mm. Then."

Smiling lightly.

Smiling as always.

With a cute smile.

She.

Kunagisa Tomo,

Lifted the curse she put on me six years ago.

The curse she continued to put on me for six years.

"Ii-chan, I hate you."

Then, she jumped down.

Suddenly, lightly—towards the interior.

The height of the fence.

The sound of landing.

She continued to walk.

I wanted to turn back.

I wanted to stop her.

But, it was all too late.

Everything was at a dead end.

What was it, I wondered curiously.

Just…from something like dying.

Was my connection with Kunagisa so weak that just from dying, it would be lost?

Was our fate that shallow?

Of course, for me, originally a normal civilian, and the Kunagisa Syndicate's direct descendant—there shouldn't have been a connection in the first place.

Even then, we met.

We met and fell in love with each other.

I stole Kunagisa's heart—

And Kunagisa held me by the heart.

Then it should have been fine like that.

This should have been a fitting end.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa Tomo's Tomo is for friend.

Kunagisa and I…

I wonder what kind of pair of friends we looked like from the outside.

Probably frightening.

Like under endless inertia.

Unbalanced.

Dubious whether we were in gear—

Despite that, being conscious of each other,

Strangely dependent on each other—those kinds of friends.

But that was a good form for us.

I won't say that we were a pair as one.

If we could stay friends, that would be enough.

That felt the best.

Kunagisa Tomo—Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo—

"Even though I like her."

Even though...I like her so much.

There are things that you can't do anything about with just that in this world—I knew that, that's why I didn't like anyone, I didn't compete with anyone, I didn't get close to anyone...

Where did I collapse?

Who made me go astray?

I resent you, Tomo.

Why didn't you stall me more properly and firmly and clearly?

Why didn't you let the me drenched in sin and corruption—

Stay stalled forever?

No...

It's not...that.

If I was responsible for making Kunagisa's time, which had stopped for a long time, move again as Shigai Touno said, this conclusion was something I wished for.

I changed.

I started moving.

That was why.

That was what I'd asked for.

Therefore, Kunagisa.

Kunagisa released me.

She lifted the spell cast on me.

"Yo."

Clank.

The fence beside me rang.

Without any footsteps getting closer, without anything, Zerozaki calmly sat in the position where Kunagisa had been just a moment prior, as if that were his usual place.

For once,

He didn't have his usual smile.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"...Right." I nodded. "For now, you stay there in silence."

"Is it fine here?"

"That's the best place."

"Hmm."

"Because, even though your personality is bad, you have a cute face. Well, though not as much as Kunagisa, but you can still serve to rest my eyes."

"...Is that blue one your woman?"

"Were you watching?"

"I passed by her. She smiled very happily."

"Hmm. Well, she's not mine. I was her man, and I was thrown away just now."

"Lame."

"Shut up. Didn't I tell you to be silent?"

"I can't believe that line came out of your mouth."

Then, Zerozaki finally laughed, "Kahahah.".

And you are a demonic killer born from a smile, I thought.

A demonic killer with a splendid smile, it wasn’t even funny.

"...Touno-san... What did she do?"

"Ahn? Aah, that weird woman."

"You didn't kill her, did you?"

"..."

"Why are you silent?"

"It's a joke. No, um, well, that woman and her comrades, there were kind of a lot. Five in total. I talked with them for a bit."

"Talk?"

The bunch from that *Team* and Zerozaki Hitoshiki, cyberterrorists and a demonic killer, what kind of exciting conversation could they have had?

"Yeah. By chance, we had a common acquaintance—I heard some interesting stories. Also stories about you."

"Are you a housewife? Don't collect information from idle gossip."

"I'm surprisingly good at collecting information, you know. Well not as much as that *Chiikun* or something, though."

"..."

Well, certainly, if you were able to draw out information about *Chiikun* from that bunch who stay together despite being on bad terms, you'd be pretty impressive.

"But it looks like that woman didn't know the reason you were attacked at that Imperial Garden. I tried getting it out using various ways, but...she only knows that the *Miotsukushi*, those twins, were trying to kill you there—apparently, she didn't know the Space Creator was there."

"Hmm..."

"There seems to be an error in communication which crumbled the balance of the situation... That woman said things like 'There is no way for Ichirizuka to go against Mr. Fox's will, so there must be circumstances', but essentially, that just means she doesn't know anything."

"Right."

At this point, I don't even have to say that, unlike *Team*, the people from the *Thirteen Stairs* don't seem to have any solidarity—then that means that Touno-san came to my apartment not only to inform me about Kunagisa but to also transmit that fact.

If before I met up with Kunagisa,

If I were killed, it would’ve been bad.

"But really, that Admiral—so that was what Aniki found fishy... Well, it's fine. It doesn't matter. It's past stuff. Err, those guys went somewhere. I didn't really chase after them though."

"I see..."

Went somewhere. Then Shigai Touno will probably stop being Utage Kudan, and will stop being in the *Thirteen Stairs*. She will betray the fox-masked man, four thousand and forty-one times.

I'm sure these guys,

Will not leave Kunagisa Tomo's side.

Unlike me.

They could probably die for Kunagisa Tomo's sake.

"So, Defective Product. What are you going to do now?"

"Mm..."

"To be frank, I'm quite hungry myself." Zerozaki said. "You can't have that attitude against the person who saved your life just because you got rejected by a woman, right?"

"...Right."

I raised my hung down face.

Looked at the sky.

The blue sky.

The blue sky—I like it.

That was what I thought.

"For now, let's head back to the apartment. If you're fine with water, I can let you drink however much you want."

"I'm telling you to let me eat a meal."

"Yes, yes."

I jumped down the fence.

Now, let's switch our feelings.

Though that's impossible, I thought.

I needed to go, even by forcing myself.

I needed to go, even by crawling.

I needed to go back to the apartment.

Anyhow,

At least Magokoro.

I should at least not lose Magokoro.

Goodbye, Kunagisa Tomo.

You go die.
I will kill you and go on living.

ACT 18 – A CONTINUATION THAT DOESN'T END

0

Ultimately, the world is off the mark.
It is made from piling up mistakes.
So don't try to solve it with reason.

1

Avoiding the Miotsukushi Sisters' massacre and meeting Shigai Touno—Utage Kudan—at the Imperial Garden all occured on the night of October thirty-first. That means, the time I'm experiencing now is—the morning of November 1st.

October ended.

The month that the fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi, despised so much.

He said that he hated it because too many people died.

Not dying in September, dying in October.

October being over... Around me, and around the fox-masked man—in the end, how many died?

Niounomiya Izumu, and strictly speaking, Niounomiya Rizumu too.

Ishinagi Moeta.

Kino Raichi.

Furuyari Zukin—the eleventh and the twelfth.

Kunagisa wasn't dead yet, so counting just them, six people?

Six people.

The part of me that would have thought this number of deaths wasn't too many must have been completely done for..

Just six people.

While in the passenger seat of the Fiat 500, for some reason, that thought crossed my mind.

In the driver’s seat, the demonic killer.

Zerozaki was the one to say "As if I could leave the wheel to a guy that just got rejected by a woman." His reasoning was absurd, but well, I could feel some sympathy and kindness in those words, so I obediently accepted.

I honestly felt some kindness.

However…I was not as depressed as Zerozaki seemed to be worried about, nor was I confused, and most importantly, I was not hurt.

There was no pain.

Those wounds had no pain.

As if the suffering had been interrupted.

Even though…I thought I would be more panicked.

Even though I thought I would bawl and draw closer to Kunagisa.

Did I accept it—the reality that Kunagisa would die?

To think it was that simple.

Hearing Shigai Touno's words, running back to Senbon Nakadachiuri, borrowing the keys from Miiko-san at the apartment, taking the minimum amount of baggage, going to the parking lot, starting up the fiat—arriving to the building in Shirosaki with Zerozaki and Touno-san.

Finding Kunagisa, who wasn't in her room, on the roof.

At that time,

I had completely, without any doubt, accepted all and everything.

Wounds.

Wounds without pain.

That was because—as Kunagisa had said herself, she had properly and clearly foreshadowed it—I think.

By this point,

Kunagisa had lifted the curse on me.

She untied them—untied the chains.

Of course, I won't say I was refreshed.

I couldn't feel like a weight was taken off my back.

But…

It was a fact that my body was lighter.

As if it was floating.

As if I was in the sky.

As if—as if I was on the moon.

"..."

I certainly—became light.

But that was...only because I lost something important—I felt like I had a big hole in my heart.

As if I had lost my heart.

That's why this was—emptiness.

Like before meeting Kunagisa—lacking anything inside.

Then, at first.

At first...

At first, at that time, it was revenge...

Now.

At the current point—

"I will tell you about me."

Zerozaki suddenly cut in.

"Ahn?"

"A story about Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"...I don't really care."

"Kahahah. Why, why, even though you're impatiently eager to hear it. I swear, you mister bashful."

"Did the ink of your tattoo reach all the way into your brain?"

"It's fine, just listen."

"What, don't meddle... Are you an ill-mannered drunkard?"

"There aren't any well-mannered drunkards."

"There are. Women that undress and women that become kiss demons when getting drunk. There are plenty of them present at my uni."

"Heeh, then arrange me a mixer with those girls sometimes—wait, not that."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki went along with the joke.

I mean, I was talking about Mikoko-chan and Emoto-chan though.

"You know, it's very rare for me to talk about myself—I have lead quiiite an interesting life. Just forget that you got rejected by a woman."

"..."

I don't know why, but apparently 'being rejected by a woman' was a severe case that required that much attention. Did he have some weird trauma or something? Well, I felt like half of it might have been a misunderstanding, but it wasn't that off the mark, so because we had some time before getting to the apartment, I guess I could listen to his story.

"Got it. Then I'll listen."

"Yes."

The moment he nodded, the traffic lights suddenly went red, so Zerozaki stepped on the brake and stopped the car. It was early in the morning, so the road was calm.

Thinking about it, this guy definitely didn't have a license...

In spite of that, he carefully checked the back mirror. His driving skill was better than Emoto-san's but worse than Hikari-san's. Well, most people are included in that range.

"Reuniting the fragments of info I got from that denim woman with braids and what I heard in the car from that weird woman, you probably have a good idea of the Zerozaki Clan's origin, but—just in case, to be sure, I'll explain it. The Zerozaki Clan is a gathering of demonic killers."

"Yeah. Something like a guild, right?"

"No, more like a gathering of weirdos. Full of weirdos and eccentrics, it's a wonder how I stayed normal. Like a certain little sister maniac who joyfully swings around a pair of scissors or an admiral who swings a nail bat while wearing a straw hat, or even a vegetarian whose hobby is to gouge out intestines and coil them around his body; this kind of somewhat different group of demonic killers."

"...Wasn't there a really graphic one mixed in there?"

"By the way, the scissors guy, nail bat guy, and intestine guy make up the Three Heavenly Kings of the Zerozaki Clan."

"So half-assed..."

Can't you at least get one more...?

...Well, however...I'd already heard that part.

The eccentricity, the way the Zerozaki Clan was abhorred,

And—

That Zerozaki Clan was now—

"Every demonic killer in the Zerozaki Clan had a screw loose in their head. All of them were lunatics and scoundrels, and I grew up among them. I was raised as a demonic killer."

"A demonic killer from birth, a natural born killer, right?"

"Yeah. I'll say this just in case, but the *natural born* type is pretty rare in the Zerozaki Clan. In most cases, they just *someday suddenly* become demonic killers."

"Someday suddenly?"

"Like being *possessed by an evil spirit*."

Possessed by an evil spirit.

That somehow felt like a simile.

"...From what I heard, in your case, *both parents* were demonic killers, is that true?"

"Well, yeah."

The traffic light changed, so Zerozaki answered as he made the car take off.

"So, among the clan, I was in a special position—though I say *clan*, we generally don't have any blood relationships. *Blood relationship.* If blood is thicker than water, then the Niounomiya Art Troupe and its branches' connections are much stronger."

"They are all brothers and sisters, after all."

"If the *Niounomiya* have blood relationships, the *Zerozaki* have lineage; that's the best way of putting it. Well, that kind of stuff is just a trivial

difference, but in the middle of that trivial difference is where I was born." Zerozaki said, as if it was someone else's business. "Between a demonic killer called the Ultimate and a demonic killer called the Absolute."

"..."

A pure-blooded Zerozaki.

Chaste and pure-bred.

I see, in that sense—

"It's similar to that blue one." Zerozaki said. "Zerozaki Zeroshiki and Zerozaki Hataori—those are the names of my parents. The decisive names of those two demonic killers. That said, I have almost no memory of them."

"No memory? Why?"

"They were already dead before my brain acquired any semblance of memory. I was far from aware of my surroundings, I was zero years old. After that, I—well, a lot happened, and in the end, I grew up as a man of the clan. I grew up as a demonic killer. So, I guess I'm a special case among them."

"Just from what I heard, it seems vague...but is there something like a *requirement* to enter the *Zerozaki* clan?"

"Ahn?"

"It's not like any demonic killer can enter the clan, can they?"

"Well, yeah. If there was to be a *requirement*—no, I guess there's none. Maybe there wasn't. Right, it may be better to think that people who lack all sorts of *qualifications* end up becoming *Zerozakis*."

"Hmm..."

I nodded.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki's roots.

It's not like they overlapped with me until now. They overlapped to some degree with Kunagisa on the surface—that was probably why Zerozaki decided to talk about it—but it didn't have anything to do with me.

But...

Or, as a result,

I felt an even stronger sympathy for Zerozaki.

This guy—he really was my mirror image.

"...Hey, Zerozaki."

"Um?"

"Did you know? Um, that the Zerozaki Clan you belong to...was annihilated."

"Yeah." Zerozaki nodded without missing a beat. "I already heard from that denim girl with braids. Haah..."

"..."

Zerozaki sighed, as if he was absorbed in his thoughts.

Naturally, I didn't add anything.

I didn't know what to say.

"...That woman, her atmosphere, it was kind of erotic."

"Don't get absorbed in worthless thoughts."

"And she was tall."

"I already understand your taste in women very well. Continue your story now."

"You really are no fun. Well, it seems that the denim woman with braids thought I was dead too. After all, among the Zerozaki Clan, I am a secret amongst secrets. My existence in itself isn't very known."

"A secret amongst secrets? Why?"

"If people knew that **someone like me** exists, it wouldn't be a joke. The Zerozaki Clan is built upon an unexpectedly frail foundation, a house of cards." Kahaha, Zerozaki laughed self-deprecatingly. "However, even that, at this point... Also—although we were annihilated, there should be one more survivor."

"One more?"

"No one in the clan knew that she *became* a *Zerozaki*—only me and that Strongest woman knew... Unless she left the world on her own, she should still be alive."

"..."

I didn't know who Zerozaki meant by *her*, but I couldn’t overlook the word Strongest.

Right.

I never really cleared it up until now, but—

"Zerozaki. You—in May, weren't you killed by Aikawa-san?"

"If I was, I wouldn't be here. Can't you see these long legs?"

"I don't see any long legs."

"Mm. I was about to get killed, but...I somehow survived."

"What?"

"I guess she did it for our sake—that being said, that Strongest woman, she really has no mercy. Honestly, I was ready to die. But—"

But, he said.

Zerozaki went silent.

I knew he wasn't the kind of guy to pointlessly go silent, so he probably didn't want to say the rest. I understood that. Something...must have happened. Did it concern the person he called *her*?

However, I didn't need to forcibly ask that.

It wouldn't be too late—

It wouldn't be too late to get the answer to that question after confirming Aikawa-san's safety. If I were to believe the Miotsukushi Sisters, at the very least, she was alive—

"Hey, Zerozaki."

Therefore, I changed the topic.

"Well, setting the details aside, the current situation is as you heard from Touno-san and nothing more. So, hearing that, what did you think?"

"Ahn?"

"I still haven't heard your impressions."

"Hm. When I think that you disturbed my quiet and comfortable life for such a crazy reason, apart from feeling like killing you, nothing much."

"Is that so."

"It must have been a great bother for Izumu. Being forcibly drawn out by you."

"..."

That reminds me, I still haven't asked about his relationship with Izumu-kun. I was too busy explaining my situation that I asked nearly nothing about what Kouta-san talked about. He was abroad—probably somewhere nearby the ER3 System—that should be right...

"No, what I want to ask is if you know anything, even something small, about Saitou Takashi, the fox-masked man."

Originally, there must have been a reason to search for Zerozaki.

A reason for the fox-masked man to choose him—choose him as his *enemy*.

There should have been a connection sufficient to serve as a reason.

If I was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative.

However, Zerozaki,

"I don't."

Said that.

"No, it's not like I don't know anything at all—I have some knowledge about the famous scientist Saitou Takashi and I know the legend about the great world war between the Strongest and the Worst, the *Falcon* and the *Fox*, ten years ago—it's a famous story among the *Killing Names*. But that's not directly connected to my life. Even among those *Thirteen Stairs*, although there are some that I know of, the only one I've actually met is Izumu..."

"Hmm..."

So it was too good to be true?

In the end, the insurance was just insurance?

But—it's not like I completely believed in the fox-masked man's pet theory, but at this point, having the Story advance this much—I couldn't accept that there was no connection whatsoever between Saitou Takashi and Zerozaki Hitoshiki...

Hmm.

Then maybe that *her* or Zerozaki's parents, the Ultimate and the Absolute demonic killers, have a connection with him...? No, that would be too forced, too far fetched. However, it was true that there was a certain level of obsession that the fox-masked man showed towards Zerozaki—if that wasn't the case, I wouldn't be in such a situation.

No...

That situation should already have been over.

It was over.

It should've been.

The fox-masked man stopped treating me as his enemy. He swore to not lay a hand on me. Of course, I still couldn't explain last night's attack by the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi, but...

"Umm. That would mean you had no reason to come all the way to Kyoto."

"Didn't I save your life?"

"My, my, acting like a messiah just because of that? Just how many times do you think I saved you?"

"You haven't saved me even once."

"Well, yeah."

"Hey, me."

"What is it, me?"

"I certainly don't know that *fox-masked man*. However, I can give you one piece of advice."

"Advice?"

"You said it, didn't you? The chains put on that Magokoro—that they will soon be released."

"Mm? Yes? Rurero-san said that sometime around today should be the time limit. Well, they have been gradually loosening up until now, so they are already mostly gone... They should soon be completely released."

"It's probably impossible, you know."

Zerozaki said bluntly.

Without any hesitation, using straightforward words.

"That blue one said the same thing too, right? Although I have no idea on what basis she said that, I have grounds that allow me to affirm it."

"Grounds..."

"Migishita Rurero and Kino Raichi. I don't know about these two. I don't know what kind of people they are. However, the third entangling chain, one of the managers, Tokinomiya Jikoku—that guy is dangerous."

"...Dangerous... Because he is a *Cursing Name*? But as far as *Cursing Names* go, Kino-san is also one—"

"I'm not saying that the *Cursing Names* in and of themselves are dangerous. Even the *Tokinomiya* aren't that big of a deal—in fact, I saw the corpse of one of them just the other day. But the **individual** Tokinomiya Jikoku—he is too alarming to overlook."

"...? How can you say that much?"

"Because I know of him. The man called Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"What are you saying? Didn't you just say that you haven't met any members of the *Thirteen Stairs* except for the former member Izumu-kun? Take responsibility for what you say."

"I just said I haven't met him. It's true that I just know his name. The *Cursing Names* aren't the kinda guys to appear much in front of others in the first place. It's like, how should I say it, well, they're like Tsuchinokos."

"Hm. But—"

"Just listen to people's stories until the end. You see, Tokinomiya Jikoku is—Hey, what do I even have to explain this stuff? It's a pain, so can I stop?"

"No, say it properly. I'll listen until the end."

"Is that the attitude of someone making a request? In the first place—aah, well, it's fine. You, do you already understand what the *Cursing Names* are?"

"I understand. I do, I think."

"And that the *Tokinomiya* are the group ranking first place?"

"I know."

"Then."

Zerozaki said.

"For example, if there was a person **exiled** even by those *Tokinomiyas*—what would you think about that?"

"..."

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Thought Manipulator.

"*Tokinomiya Jikoku* is, in addition to being the individual's name, the name attributed for generations to those exiled from the *Tokinomiya*."

"So... Is he famous?"

"No, it's about *Cursing Names* so it's not famous at all. He's a no-name, the kind whose story no one knows. Let me see—the same way I am a secret amongst secrets in the Zerozaki Clan, Tokinomiya Jikoku is a secret amongst secrets for the *Tokinomiya*. That's why me knowing about him is a coincidence approaching the level of a miracle. Long ago, you see—long ago, I heard it by chance from a woman we put up a common front with. According to her,

"If you were to hypothetically attempt to handle Tokinomiya Jikoku, you would need meticulous caution and strict wariness—"

She said.

"...Meticulous caution and...strict wariness...?"

Hold...

Hold on.

That kind of thing... That delicate factor, the fox-masked man doesn't have an ounce of it, does he...? He's the kind of person who doesn't care about anything if it's to end the world, you know... Even his daughter, his granddaughter, the existence he called his enemy, and of course, even himself—he really doesn't care from the bottom of his heart, that person...

That means, Tokinomiya Jikoku.

What in the world did he do to Magokoro...?

Calm down.

It's not decided yet. If I believe Rurero-san's words, Tokinomiya Jikoku didn't have the time to do anything superfluous—

"But you have no guarantee that this Rurero isn't caught up in Tokinomiya Jikoku's *Thought Manipulation*, right?"

"..."

"A will as tough as the *fox-masked man's*—as lunacy as lunatic as his wouldn't be easy to dominate with Thought Manipulation, though."

I wonder...

Rurero-san...and Kino-san, the possibility of them being under the influence of Tokinomiya Jikoku... They were both professionals, so the probability of them falling for it should've been even lower than the fox-masked man's, but...

But setting aside the Thought Manipulation.

Magokoro.

When Magokoro escaped from the fox-masked man—from his management, from his surveillance—even though Kino-san was killed and Rurero-san received serious injuries, **Tokinomiya Jikoku was the only one uninjured**. That minor detail—

Being suspicious of that should be warranted.

It is something important enough to raise suspicion.

A coincidence...?

From Magokoro's perspective, it wasn't a coincidence. She aimed for a time when Tokinomiya Jikoku was absent—then **from Tokinomiya Jikoku's perspective**, how did it look?

Also.

If I said it like this Magokoro would probably get mad and deny it head on, but—even if Tokinomiya Jikoku had the strongest influence on Magokoro's mind, aiming for when he was absent and running away—wouldn't that mean that Magokoro avoided confrontation with Tokinomiya Jikoku?

Wouldn't that mean she escaped?

DId Tokinomiya Jikoku—did he have something that warranted so much consideration?

An inevitability that made Omokage Magokoro avoid him.

An inevitability that made The Orange Seed run away from him.

Then...

"...Rather, the woman you put up a common front with, she's quite a weird woman. When talking about *Tokinomiya Jikoku* that she understood as *dangerous*, she talked as if *using him* was a premise. Is it someone from the *Killing Names* or *Cursing Names*? Or is it that *her*?"

"No, that's not the case. That woman—how do I say it? Umm, although we put up a common front, I haven't seen her face to face, and in the end, I didn't ask for her name either...and now I can't even confirm whether she was a woman or not."

"Hey hey. Are you accepting the words of someone whose face, name and even gender you don't know?"

"I do. They have that amount of worth."

"..."

I was a bit surprised.

Because I didn't think that this human failure could put that much faith in someone's existence. That demonic killer who answered without any hesitation when I asked him whether there was someone he liked.

Hmm...

In this case, I guess I should praise that *woman*.

Who could she be?

I felt like she could unexpectedly be someone I already knew...

"We're soon gonna reach the parking lot. Do you have a fixed space to park?"

"Park it wherever it's easiest to. It's made so that I can park anywhere."

In reality I shouldn't, but, well, that's how it is. Like a common agreement between the people ranting the parking space.

"...By the way, that Yukariki Ichihime, was she the disciple of the one called *Zig Zag*?"

"And she was also my disciple. What about her?"

"Nah...nothing."

"Hmm?"

Really, fate's relationships are too much of a masterpiece—mumbling something along those lines, Zerozaki backed and parked the Fiat in the same spot as it was before. Opening the door and getting out of the car, we headed towards the apartment, walking next to each other.

Turning the corner,

The rundown apartment had collapsed.

"Wh...what?"

Without thinking, that was my initial impression.

What is that?

Are you an idiot?

It was unrealistic—enough to make me think that.

"..."

Even the human failure—

He couldn't close his gaping open mouth.

His mouth was vacantly and widely opened.

The rundown apartment—it had collapsed.

Rather than collapsed, in crumbles.

I mean... It was an old building.

A two-story wooden house built however many dozens of years ago.

If you said that it was built before the war, anyone would believe you.

Some may even believe that it was built before the Meiji era.

But,

It was reduced to smithereens, leaving nothing behind.

Demolished... Right, looking at the state of the building, it must have been some kind of power shovel or other legitimate means that demolished the building, that was the only explanation for destruction of that degree.

If I were to purposely choose another explanation—

It was like a truck ran into it.

Like if there was a great disaster class earthquake...

But that kind of thing was impossible.

Whether it was an earthquake or truck, neither could attack objects with that much precision. Both the adjacent buildings were unharmed except, for

some dust. Only the objects in the territory of the rundown apartment collapsed.

Lumber.

Window glass.

Roof tiles.

Doors.

And—furniture, supplies.

Furniture... Supplies?

Huh, hey, hold on...

"This... What happened to the people inside?"

Zerozaki asked the question I had in my mind.

"It being this early in the morning, everyone should have been at home."

"...!"

Because of the hour, there were few onlookers.

But there were some here and there.

People looking at the collapsed scene.

Among them—none were present.

No one was there.

Neither Miiko-san nor Houko-chan nor Koutoumaru-san nor Nanananami—and,

Neither was Omokage Magokoro.

"...Shit!"

I ignored the people's gazes, rushed into the apartment’s ruin amongst the debris, and ascended up the lumber.

Shards of window glass stabbed my hands.

It hurt.

Splinters of the lumber stabbed my skin.

But that kind of thing—it wouldn't stop me.

I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

I could not stop.

Under this—

Laying under this, everyone was—

Where? Where? Where? Where were everyone's rooms? I had no idea. The debris-like state of the rundown apartment made it impossible to know even that.

Why...this?

Who...this?

Until just a few hours ago—it was there, wasn't it?

Wasn't it here?

Wasn't everyone here?

I borrowed the Fiat's key from Miiko-san.

What was everyone else...doing?

At that time...my head was filled with Kunagisa.

My mind was full of Kunagisa.

What Houko-chan was doing, what Koutoumaru-san was doing, what Nanananami was doing, I didn't know.

Magokoro—The Orange Seed, what was she doing?

"Fuck, fuck, fuck—"

What's...that?

What in the world happened?

Until yesterday—until just yesterday, it was peaceful, wasn't it? It was peaceful, as if everything was over, wasn't it? Despite that, at the Imperial Garden, the Miotsukushi Sisters came in Zukin-chan's stead.

As if rolling down a slope—as if falling.

As if rolling.

As if collapsing.

Everything went astray.

The madness started.

Miotsukushi Sisters—Utage Kudan.

The separation with—Kunagisa Tomo.

And at last, my residence's collapse?

What was this kind of thing…this absurdity?

I could only imagine a human caused this. I could only think that someone's will was at work. No, of course that was the case. This kind of natural phenomenon was impossible. But that wasn't what I meant, not that, but—when something is about to go well, I immediately lose everything. When I think I can get my hands on something, the next moment, it falls through. It felt like I was being robbed of what had been given to me, like something important had been erased—like I was being moderately and randomly harassed by a whimsical perpetrator that doesn't give a damn. It was a persistent and exuberant sensation—

And I didn't understand the meaning of it.

What kind of necessity was there?

What kind of inevitability was there?

To this phenomenon—

"Drop it."

The person saying that, laying a hand on my shoulder, was not Zerozaki.

Turning my back,

The one there was Kazuhito-san.

Ikaruga Kazuhito.

All black clothes, a necktie, sunglasses.

Kyoto Prefectural Police—Investigation Section One, a detective.

"…We meet again, kid."

"Why…are you here?"

"A report from virtuous civilians."

Kazuhito-san said that while carrying his tobacco in his mouth.

Briefly looking back, Zerozaki was no longer here.

That bastard, he must have fled after seeing the detective. What a terrifying awareness of danger…despite smiling so foolishly, he was tactful in areas like that. I see…unless it's been covered up, that guy could still be on the wanted list of the Kyoto Prefecture Police.

However—

"Are you alone?"

"...Yes, well." I nodded. "More importantly—What about you, Kazuhito-san, are you alone? Are Sasaki-san or the other policemen—"

"Everyone went back."

Kazuhito-san said.

With a truly bothered attitude.

Because of the sunglasses, I couldn't see his expression, but...

"It's been quite a while since the report—people heard a sound resembling fireworks being launched, and when they went to check the building which should have been there, it was apparently gone. It seems they thought it was a natural collapse since the building was old, but just in case, they called 110. That was in the middle of the night."

"..."

"There didn't seem to be any crime, so everyone was withdrawn. And since the place was close to my house, I was told to stay here." Though it's not my street, Kazuhito-san muttered. "Sasa was positioned here until just earlier, but—well, how should I say, that's how it is."

"No—that's how it is, you say...Kazuhito-san. Is there no...crime?"

"None."

"No, isn't this a case...no matter how you look at it? This kind of thing, what can it be except a case?"

"There's no way—we can only call it a case when there are victims. Without victims, we cannot move."

"Victims...?"

"Yeah. There's no crime—**the residents** said the same thing, 'This is not a case'." Kazuhito-san said. "What a frightening bunch, they arranged their stories in an instant. We can't contact the landlord...as usual, this is a messed up apartment."

"...That means!"

I drew closer to Kazuhito-san.

"Everyone—is fine!"

"Fine, not really." Kazuhito-san said, as if the words were coming from his back teeth. "It didn't seem like they were fine. Everyone went to the hospital, after all."

"..."

Although the worst situation was avoided, it wasn't like they didn't suffer any damage from the collapse. In this situation, they were probably saved by the policemen—I guess, but they weren't a bunch to do things normally, so they most likely all bluffed and managed to get through it.

After all, everyone seemed to hate government authority...

But as expected, that government authority wouldn't retreat entirely from this situation immediately—it must have been quite a while since that exchange—probably just after Touno-san, Zerozaki, and I left for Shirosaki.

Just about when the date changed.

When we changed from October to November.

...Ah.

I was struck by an idea and asked Kazuhito-san.

"Um—Kazuhito-san, err, did you meet everyone?"

"Ahn?"

"The residents from the apartment, everyone."

"Of course—well, I also know them by face. That samurai woman, that cute doll girl, that Witch, and that muscly old man—what about it? They're all alive, you know? That being said, the only one able to walk on their own is the Witch."

"...No..."

Magokoro—she wasn't there.

With that remarkable hair, there was no way Kazuhito-san would overlook her.

I indirectly informed him about Hime-chan and Moeta-kun, mixing in a huge amount of lies, but not yet about Magokoro. She was still hidden. Recently Magokoro had started going out in the neighbourhood so he may have known her face, but he didn't think that she was a resident. Right, it was

planned. So it was normal that Magokoro wasn't included in Kazuhito-san's list of *everyone*.

However, Magokoro.

Where did she go—

Was she still buried in the debris?

"..."

Thinking like that was foolish.

A horrible deception.

This—

This,

It was obviously Magokoro's doing.

This kind of thing—who else could have done it?

Even if it was old, there were too few existences able to collapse, demolish, and crumble a whole building. The only character left around me able to do something on the same level as when Aikawa Jun and Niounomiya Izumu destroyed Kiyomizu Temple's stage,

Was none other than Magokoro.

That was why everyone shut their mouths.

They erased the crime.

They covered—covered for Magokoro.

Because Omokage Magokoro was already part everyone's family.

But...

In the first place, why...?

Why did Magokoro do something like this?

First, the word rampage came to mind. Magokoro who was released from the three chains, from the *spell*, as Emoto-san, Rurero-san, and the fox-masked man feared, lost control and rampaged...

However, that was impossible.

Magokoro was properly able to control herself.

She could control her own power.

Magokoro's violence was only her own.

Even if the *spell* became zero—even if she failed to control herself, it was hard to imagine it would have reached such a state.

"There's quite a few less onlookers—during the night, there were quite a lot. Hm... Aah, right, right. I have a message from the Witch, kid."

"...What is it?"

Nanananami...

The Worst Witch, Nanananami Nanami.

" 'Don't mind it. It's not your fault.' she said."

"...!"

From her,

From that woman, such words—

They were more hurtful, heavy, harsh, and loud than anything.

Of course, that was probably her aim...

However, she was a woman who didn't say anything but her true thoughts.

"That means, well, it's your fault."

Kazuhito-san said, without any mercy.

I see, I understood.

He wasn't someone to stay on the scene 'for some reason'. Kazuhito-san was waiting for me all this time. He was waiting for me to come back here. To hear from me, the last resident of the apartment.

It was bad...

In this situation where there was no one else around, I couldn't even align my story with the others'—I had no choice but to play dumb. Now that it'd come to it, I was rather thankful that Zerozaki nimbly ran away. It would've been quite forced to suddenly introduce a boy with a tattoo on his face. Everything happened while I was gone, would it be safest to claim that...?

However, what Kazuhito-san said was not an official question related to the apartment's collapse.

"You. Go somewhere."

"...Eh?"

Without thinking, I responded with astonishment.

Kazuhito-san repeated the same words.

Just go somewhere.

"No matter what, this is going too far. This goes well over what we ordinary people can allow."

Kazuhito-san's words had almost no intonation. Like he simply said what he was thinking out loud, that kind of speech.

"It's a building, you know? A proper construction just went missing, you know? Luckily there were no casualties, but it's a case where it wouldn't have been strange if anyone were to die, if they were to be caught up in the damages."

It's a case, Kazuhito-san repeated.

It's a case.

"It's something that shouldn't happen in Japan."

Something that shouldn't happen in Japan.

Those words—I heard them in May too.

If I remember correctly, I heard them from Aikawa-san.

But...Kazuhito-san.

The one pronouncing them now was Kazuhito-san.

"Normally we should conduct a more in depth investigation, but to be frank, everyone from the police withdrew because they were scared. Scared of the cause that collapsed a whole apartment, that demolished it."

"..."

"**Because we are human**. We instinctively understand what's scary. We understand—understand **what kind of things should not be understood**."

"Scared, you say—"

"We're scared of you."

Kazuhito-san said.

"So just go somewhere."

I—

Had no choice but to be silent.

It wasn’t really the first time this happened. It had happened many times until now. Being seen as scary, being abhorred, none of it was rare in my life.

Even Suzunashi-san said it to me.

That unknown things are scary.

They are scary because we cannot understand them.

That was natural.

I had no intention of denying natural things.

I had never asked for comprehension in the first place.

But,

Being told that now, in this situation.

Was too—too cruel.

It's cruel, I thought.

It's like whipping a corpse.

Where’s the fun in bullying me?

"Don't misunderstand—I like you as an individual, kid. But, even then, I don't have it in me to allow that. Having you, who can create such a terrifying phenomenon, in front of me makes me so scared I might piss my pants."

So scared...

I might piss my pants.

"...But even if you tell me that—"

"It can't be helped. There's nothing I can do. We just understand. That you are scary."

"..."

Scary.

Not scary because they could not understand.

Scary because they could understand.

They comprehended that I was scary.

"I see...exactly. I...strayed away...long ago."

Strayed from the regular path.

In the end...

Not Hikari-san, but Teruko-san was correct, huh.

In reality, it was correct. The apartment collapse, being suddenly confronted with that, I was surprised and dumbfounded in front of this mysterious event, but thinking about it, in the last few months—no, in the last ten months, at the very least, all the actions I'd taken since I came back to the Japan, ever since I came back to this country—

Weren't proper.

A decapitation murder on an isolated island.

A demonic killer appearing in the town of Kyoto.

A schoolgirl capable of training mercenaries.

A research facility trying to intentionally create geniuses.

An undying girl's death.

It's absurd, isn't it?

No, that alone would have still been fine. Even if my life carried abnormalities and superpowers, it's not like I couldn't blend into normal society after just that. Exactly, Aikawa-san, for example, managed to do well with Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san.

That was...something I couldn't do.

It was impossible.

Therefore, I was being feared.

I wonder, for now it was still fine, but if Kazuhito-san knew—knew the bare and unvarnished truth about me until now, what would his reaction be?

At that time,

I'm sure it wouldn't end with being scared.

I'm sure—I'm sure I would be killed.

I would be persecuted.

I wouldn't be able to live.

Like the former Kunagisa Tomo.

Like the former Omokage Magokoro.

And like the current Omokage Magokoro.

In order to live, I must adapt.

I must adapt cowardly.

Either that, or I must run away.

I must go somewhere.

"..."

That was me.

Just by me being alive, everyone was bothered.

Even though I decided to live.

Even though I denied death.

Even then,

I was about to lose to that reality.

"...My bad. I said too much."

I must have been making quite the pathetic face, which was why Kazuhito-san awkwardly took off his sunglasses and said that line.

I felt like I saw this person's eyes for the first time in a while.

No, it might have been the first time.

That being said, even if Kazuhito-san bowed his head, he didn't withdraw his previous statements.

"They're my true thoughts. I'm sorry."

"..."

"...In any case, we won't interfere with this case anymore. Well, some pressure will be applied from somewhere, like for the corpse of the high school girl found in the Imperial Garden yesterday."

"...High school girl?"

Was it...Zukin-chan?

I see...

Somehow, until now I was awfully worried about the *obvious world,* but Kazuhito-san's few words, those words of rejection—they worked too well.

What happened?

It was a wonder.

For a weak, powerless, and ordinary kid—for whom scattering around in confusion among those with abnormal powers and abnormal talents was a perfect fit—although I say that I'd deviated, a place like that should've been my natural habitat,

But before I knew it,

I had become the biggest heretic.

Had it been this way from the beginning?

Or was it because it was finally the end?

That kind of thing, even now—I don't know.

At the very least, it was decided.

Then—

Either way is the same, I guess.

A phone's ringtone rang. Kazuhito-san took out his phone from inside his suit's pocket.

"Yeah... Okay. Got it. I'll go back."

After saying that briefly, he hung up the phone and looked at me. At this point, he had surely said everything he wanted, so he put back his sunglasses in silence,

"Well then."

And turned his back to me.

Parting words.

I couldn't return them.

Even though I didn't really have any business with him or something to say or something to ask, for some reason, I was filled with the urge to stop Kazuhito-san, but—

Breaking the corner, I could no longer see him, so ultimately I ended up saying nothing, leaving my arm half-assedly extended.

Among the debris.

Looking like: ruins of war, among the debris.

Among lumber and glass and iron scrap.

I, powerlessly,

"...It's just nonsense."

Mumbled.

My shoulders slumped.

At this rate, I was about to fall onto my knees.

My hands—they were full of cuts and blood.

It hurts.

It hurts, I thought.

Pain—wounds.

Wounds accompanied by pain.

This is what it means—to live.

"Nah, a masterpiece, rather."

"..."

...Zerozaki was already back.

What terrifying footwork.

Actually, it seemed he'd never left the vicinity to begin with.

"No, I was actually on top of that building's roof."

"You really are a nimble bastard..."

"He said a lot of things."

"Yeah. I'm hurt."

"Don't mind it. It's just what a commoner thinks."

"If I could dismiss it like that, it would be easy, but well, I thought of myself as a commoner. So I feel like I've been abandoned by my comrades now."

"Kahahah. Stop worrying by yourself. You have me, don't you?" Zerozaki said. "I came to Kyoto explicitly to save you. Feel free to rely on me."

"Thank you, Zerozaki-fleeing-the-instant-he-sees-a-detective's-face-kun."

"Not at all, no need to thank me. Even if you, the one who created a reason for me to be pursued by the prefecture even though I left no proof, thanked me, it wouldn't feel good."

Zerozaki laughed,

I didn't laugh.

"...Well, for the twelve people in Kyoto, that Strongest might have covered it up—"

"Hmm."

Aikawa-san might have...huh.

"So, what are we gonna do now?" Zerozaki said after looking around us. "This place doesn't really feel like a good spot to sit down and enjoy a good lunch."

"Yes. Someone doing that in the middle of this debris would just be a pervert."

However, ever since before, he'd become a character only interested in food... Was he okay?

"Aren't there valuable objects buried in the rubble? Wanna search for your passport, seal and stuff before some looter comes and steals them?"

"No, that probably won't be necessary."

You would easily understand after kicking around some of the debris.

Among this debris...not a single thing...

Not a single thing—had kept its original form.

The furniture.

The books.

The music CD.

The dumbell racks.

The beds.

The bottles.

The seals.

Everything, from large objects to small ones, was, without anything missing, divided into more than two parts.

Twisted or warped.

Purely—thoroughly.

To an unhealthy extent.

That, well, you would understand by looking closely—you could understand by observing closely. Understand that it wasn't simple destruction driven by violence, but a thorough destruction using simple violence.

A frightening demolition job.

A disproportionately biased demolition job.

Everything,

Was in an irreparable state.

"So the damages for me are just on the level of books... Aah, Miiko-san and Nananami must have taken enormous damage."

Miiko-san had an antique collection and Nanananami collected old books.

Well, there wasn't a thing left untouched.

"I see. Haahn—Aah, it's true, looking at it, it's really true. This place was destroyed thoroughly. Hmm, rather than trying to destroy the objects, it feels more like they were trying to destroy the coordinates themselves. **To the point where they couldn't ever return to their original form**. At least the principle shouldn't be that far from that."

"Zerozaki. If it was you, could you do something like that?"

"It's not like I don't know a few people—**who could do something on that level**. But people **who could do this**—no matter what, I can't think of any."

And thinking that it was a *process* that took hardly any time, it's no wonder that old guy got scared, Zerozaki said.

"Is it the work of that Magokoro girl?"

"Probably."

"But why?"

"That's... What I want to ask."

"But I'm the one asking."

"Then I will answer that I don't know."

There should have been no reason to rampage.

At the very least, the Magokoro that had become close to this apartment's residents—shouldn't have had any reason to destroy this building and hurt everyone, so why?

I had no idea.

As far as possibilities went, a subordinate of the fox-masked man, one of the *Thirteen Stairs* could have caused this destruction. However, I couldn't find any meaning in forcing that logic just to attach a reason to this.

What should I do?

In this situation...

"For now, we have to go to the hospital. I'm worried about everyone's state...from what Kazuhito-san said, their lives don't seem to be in danger, at least...but even then, I'm worried. Miiko-san and the dakimakura...I mean, Houko-chan, Houko-chan was just discharged from the hospital, so that makes me even more worried. Also, I need to ask what happened."

"Right. Everyone was at the scene, so they should know something."

"Although it's dubious whether they were able to properly understand what was happening. After all, it must have been an overwhelming destruction that didn't give them time to even blink."

Magokoro—at the Sumiyuri Academy.

Blasting Moeta-kun, sweeping Houko-chan, hitting Aikawa-san, piercing Izumu-kun—that kind of overwhelming destruction.

Grasping that was impossible for ordinary people.

Even more so when it was on a peaceful and uneventful night—everyone except Miiko-san must have been asleep.

Then...

"...It's useless to keep on wondering. Let's go."

Maybe I should contact Rabumi-san in advance—no, if the ambulance transported them, they were not necessarily at the hospital where Rabumi-san was. They should have gone to the closest one...

While sorting out my thoughts, I decided it was best to leave the apartment site alongside Zerozaki for now. Exiting the mountain of debris and looking back, it really looked like a scene of a demolition. An old building being destroyed to make space for a new one. It was a scenery reminiscent of that.

But,

Being old wasn't a bad thing.

To be honest, it wasn't an easy to live in environment, but now that I had no house to rest, what would I do from now on? That doubt was certainly in my head.

As Kazuhito-san said,

Did I only have the option to **go somewhere**?

The one who accomplished that was Suzunashi-san.

The Suzunashi-san who called me scary.

She lived in the mountains.

An ascetic monk and a depraved monk.

But I didn't know whether I was able to become defiant like Suzunashi-san.

"The past, you know, it's important."

Zerozaki said abruptly.

"Because there is a past, there can be a present and a future."

"..."

"But you see, same breed." And Zerozaki continued. "It's not like the present is only constructed from the past—in the same way, the future isn't built from just the past and the present either. That's what I think."

"Then what else can there be? From what else, other than the past, can the present be built? And the future—from what else, other than the past and present, can it be constructed?"

"Who knows. If I knew that, I wouldn't be suffering. It's because we don't know that we live pathetically like this, isn't it?"

Find the answer yourself.

It felt like that was the answer I'd been told.

"In reality, what a masterpiece. ...Hey, Nonsense User. What do you think living is?"

"What is it? So suddenly."

"Answer. What is living?"

"Who knows... Though I feel that asking that of the current me is too cruel."

"I recently came to think of living as *thinking that you are alive*."

"Ahn?"

"In other words—as long as someone doesn't think they are *alive*, they don't count as being alive. It's a definition by process of elimination. Or by negation, I guess? Setting aside what I think myself...for the clan—for the bunch of the Zerozaki Clan, that was probably the case."

"So they repeatedly murder to feel like *they are alive*? Those were murders committed in order to *live*? For a demonic killer, that's too selfish—too shabby of an excuse. The name of the legendary demonic killer's gathering would cry."

"But you know, most of the members of the clan I knew were pathetic guys just like that. In reality, the *Zerozaki*'s killing has no meaning—there's pure bloodthirst—it's a phrase you hear often, but I think the truth is that they might've simply been lonely."

"Lonely...?"

"Not murder committed in order to live. That's just putting on airs. What was important was to be united as a clan. Right, what those guys were yearning for... No, at least for my perverted Aniki—he was only yearning for the sensation of being alive—"

The sensation...of being alive.

Thinking that you are alive.

Living.

If that's the keyword...

"—Watch out!"

Having thought of something, just when we cut the corner, Zerozaki pulled on my collar from the back with all of his strength.

I was strangled.

Being out of breath, my consciousness was about to get disrupted.

However, Zerozaki didn't care about that and, using all his force, threw me behind himself in one swoop and then jumped backwards himself.

Then.

In the place where we were walking on the sidewalk.

A car came rammed in.

Along with the piercing sound of brakes, it climbed the sidewalk and, just before hitting an electric pole, barely even a few centimeters before—while letting out the strong smell of burning rubber, it stopped.

I fell on my back, hitting the asphalt.

I was dumbfounded.

Not simply because I was surprised,

But because I had seen it before.

Because I recognized that car.

"...Ah."

A white—Mercedes Benz.

S Class.

Zerozaki hopped with regular steps to my side. Showing the intent of protecting me from the individuals inside the car.

But,

That wasn't necessary.

The one who came out of the car was—

"S-sorry."

As expected, Emoto Sonoki-san.

Raincoat and long boots.

I understood that Zerozaki's face turned pale.

"Wh-when I tried to stop the c-car, I, I could see Ikkun... Err, I messed up and stepped on the accelerating pedal, and lost the handle—"

"..."

Didn't that mean she tried to kill me by running me over?

And,

Clank, the door on the side of the passenger seat opened.

"...Ah."

From there, Rurero-san got out.

A body bound in bandages, gauze and a corset—while her appearance still looked painful, in the last half-month she was somehow able to recover enough to at least walk on her own.

Rurero-san looked at me,

"Hah—"

And smiled in a stylish way.

"It's been a while, *Ii-chan*. I'm glad you seem healthy."

"...Thank you."

Emoto Sonoki.

Migishita Rurero.

Why...were those two here?

Before thinking about that—for now, I was relieved. I was finally able to be at ease.

Miotsukushi Sisters.

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami—since they dealt with Furuyari Zukin, the *traitor*—I was wondering if Emoto-san and Rurero-san, in the same way, had been purged by those two; well, I was somewhat worried.

For now, the two of them seemed to be fine.

"So-sorry... So-sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry."

Emoto-san...

She was holding her body with both arms, but still being unable to restrain herself, she was frantically trembling and mechanically putting words together with her bloodshot eyes open.

"I, I am sorry—I, I am sorry! A-asking for forgiveness would be too impudent, right, I can't possibly ask that. F-for me, I, Ikkun is an important, friend, but, Ikkun, surely won't be able to forgive me, won't forgive me, he is thinking of using this as an opportunity to sever his ties with me, that must be true, it, it's obvious that in reality he didn't think of me as a friend from the start so I was just used as he pleased I was just used as he pleased, h-how, didn't I notice that sooner, wasn't that the case since the start, how many times do I need to repeat the same thing before being satisfied, how many times do I need to be fooled... Uh, it-it's wrong! It-it's not like I didn't believe in Ikkun, I believe you, I believe you, b-but, this is my problem, I-I am—"

"..."

Alright.

As usual.

Looking to the side, I saw Hitoshiki looking seriously creeped out. He stayed on his toes to be able to run off at any moment. Umm, I didn't think that was the case, but maybe Zerozaki wasn't too into girls?

"Doctor. You need to calm down." Rurero-san, unable to watch, put her hand on Emoto-san's shoulder. "It's fine, it's fine. Everyone loves you."

"D-don't touch me!"

Emoto-san shook off Rurero-san.

"E-even Rurero-san, I'm sure you only think of me as someone who will heal your injuries!"

"...No, well, I mean... You're a doctor."

Rurero-san wore a forced smile.

...Somehow, they made for a surprisingly good team.

Emoto-san said she liked Rurero-san too; a friendship may have been born in the last month.

"Ah... I-I said some weird things again. So—sorry. Ikkun, and Rurero-san... Be-because of my personality..." Emoto-san said apologetically. "Be-because I was, long ago, a bully..."

"Haah... I see."

...Wait, hey!

So you were a bully?

"I, I hated being bullied, so when I bullied them before they could, I was afraid of the payback, so I continued without limits... Even though my heart hurt, even though I didn't like it and knew those were bad things, I couldn't stop the bullying..."

"..."

That was the first time I'd heard that kind of story.

What an unpleasant spiral...

A story I didn't want to dive deeper into.

"Well, more importantly."

Setting aside Emoto-san, who was still spouting things, Rurero-san passed Zerozaki and me with unreliable footwork, and headed towards the scene of the apartment's destruction. Suddenly realizing something, Emoto-san followed after her.

What is it...?

Did they come to see the apartment?

I thought they came to see me, but...

"Hey, oi."

Zerozaki said.

"...So that's *Emoto-san*?"

"Yes. Raincoat and long boots."

"And, next to her is Rurero-san, huh..."

"Exactly."

"Hey, defective product."

"What is it, human failure?"

"Even if we're far apart, I'm always supporting you."

"You can't go home yet."

I grabbed Zerozaki, who tried to run away, by the arm and dragged him towards Emoto-san and Rurero-san. The two of them were, as expected,

gazing from a distance at the destroyed, demolished rundown apartment that had turned into a mountain of debris.

"That's...no good."

"Yes. No good."

"I'm beat."

"What should we do..."

"It would have been for the best if we made it in time, though—"

"Even if we made it...there was nothing we could have done."

"If I was there, maybe there could have been something I could've done. Well...even that wish was faint though..."

"Umm..."

Those two were having a conversation like that.

I didn't understand what they meant, but are they talking about Magokoro? Right. Then I—I had something I must ask Rurero-san.

I inserted myself between those two and the mountain of debris.

"Um...Rurero-san."

"It's my bad."

Rurero-san said, before I could say anything.

"I can't really say that it's my responsibility, but—well, even then, there's no doubt I was an *accomplice*—"

"Then—did you really?"

"Yeah."

Rurero-san nodded.

"I underestimated him—Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"..."

"**That person—he put a double Thought Manipulation on Magokoro. One that would be put into action—when mine and Raichi's *spells* would be released**."

"...!"

What was referred to in the field of hypnotism as—posthypnotic suggestion.

No, however—however, even then.

Even then, it shouldn't have swayed things this much. Be it posthypnotic suggestions or whatever... I mean, Tokinomiya Jikoku's *techniques* were similar to Rurero-san's *skill* in the sense that, without direct contact with the target, over a long time, the effectiveness would eventually fade out—since Nanananami was guarding her, there was no way Tokinomiya Jikoku could have made contact with Magokoro in the past twenty days.

"Rurero-san... What do you mean?"

"Aah. That's—"

"Ah. Ikkun. You are injured."

As if interrupting Rurero-san's line, Emoto-san leaned forward and swiftly raised my hands. But...they were certainly drenched in blood because of when I tried to dig up the debris, but why did she even care in this situation...

"Aah...you got stabbed by glass. We need to treat it quickly or it'll become dangerous. I have a medkit inside the car, so wait a little, Ikkun."

"No, Emoto-san, it's not the time—"

I didn't only want to ask about Magokoro, but also about the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi—I must also ask why Zukin-chan had to be killed. However Emoto-san,

"There is nothing more important than treatment."

Affirmed strongly.

I glanced at Rurero-san in search of help, but she just stated "...No, it's fine.” in a fed up tone.

"At any rate, this place—it’s not really suited to talk."

Paying more attention,

The number of onlookers began to increase again.

It was beginning to approach the commute time.

Although no one could understand what happened, well, the situation should still catch their eyes. This location being complicated to reach, I didn't think a big crowd would form—however, Emoto-san and Rurero-san stood out too much. Furthermore, both of them were beautiful girls... Also, since there was a boy wearing a military uniform and bearing a face tattoo, it made it look like I was a cosplayer as well.

It might've been for the best to change our location...

"It'll probably be quite an elaborate talk. Also—"

Rurero-san said.

"We also have something to ask of *Ii-chan*—**the person in the back seat must think so too**."

Back...seat.

Didn't only two people come?

Was there still one more person?

My consciousness suddenly started to rustle.

Impossible...

Now, in this situation, those two—The *Doctor*, Emoto Sonoki and the *Puppeteer*, Migishita Rurero, **the only person that could be accompanying them**...

Speaking of people that could move with them among the *Thirteen Stairs*.

"...!"

I released Zerozaki's arm—

And rushed down the way I'd just come.

Breaking the corner,

Arriving at the white Mercedes Benz still parked on the sidewalk.

Then—

Pulling the back seat door with all my force.

It wasn't locked.

The door opened disappointingly easily,

Inside it,

"Kukukuh—"

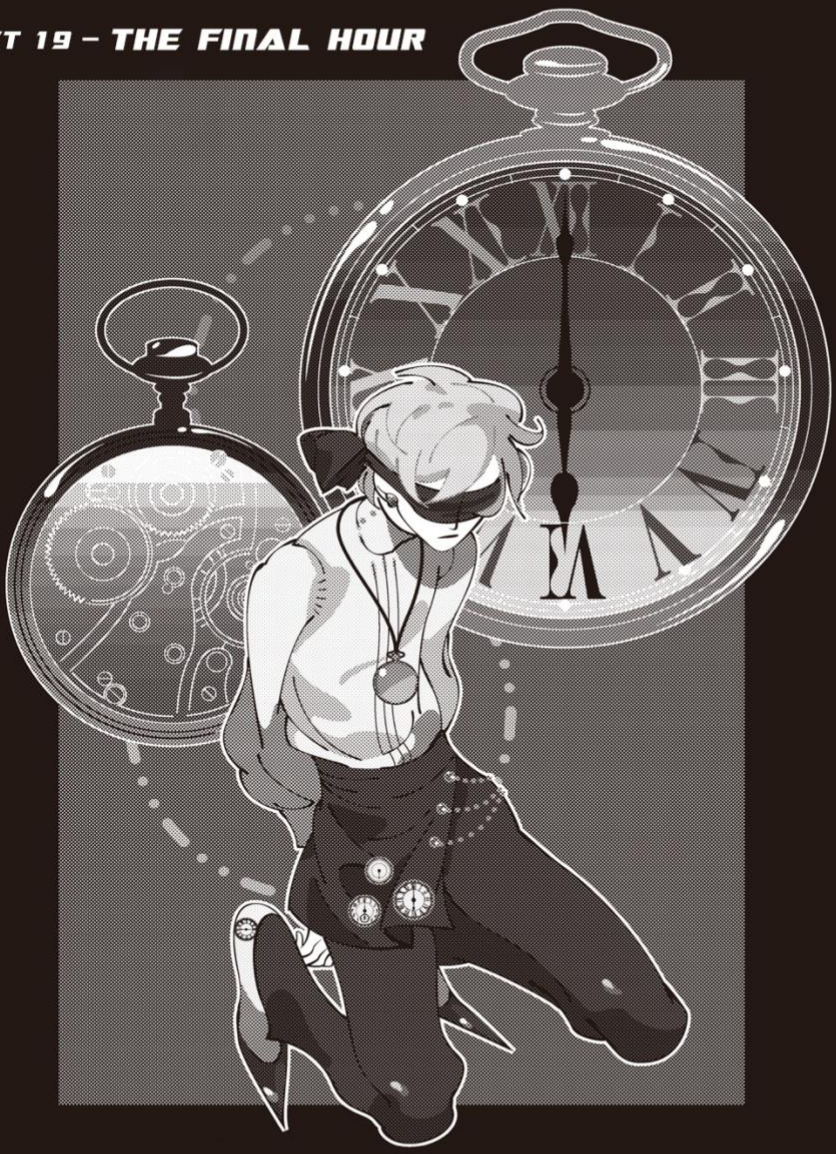
Laughing lightly,
That individual leisurely revealed himself.

"Yo—my enemy."

Needless to say, it was the fox-masked man.
A white kimono...and a fox mask.
Tall—as if looking down on me.
He would never see me again—
He would never show up in front of me anymore.
The man that should have promised that...
Was now in front of my eyes.
And,
That wasn't all.
One more person—
The person who got out of the car following the fox-masked man.

The sight was red, one that I hadn’t seen in a month.
Aikawa Jun.

ACT 19 – THE FINAL HOUR



TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU

THOUGHT MANIPULATOR

0

What you are searching for is nowhere.

1

Rather than bizarre, it was queer.
Rather than unnatural, supernatural.

Changing our location—
Changing the scene to Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility.
The former Saitou Clinic.
The tatami floored—waiting room.
Surrounding the wooden tea table—six people.
Saitou Takashi.
Aikawa Jun.
Emoto Sonoki.
Migishita Rurero.
Zerozaki Hitoshiki.
And me.
The fox-masked man, the contractor, the doctor, the puppeteer, demonic killer—
And the Nonsense User.
Considering the relationships between those six, a situation in which all of them could drink tea around a table should have been impossible, no matter how much you thought about it.

First, Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun—parent-in-law and biological parent, they'd killed each other ten years ago from Aikawa-san's perspective; and, he was also the person that she'd always been searching for.

And I was, from Saitou Takashi, from the fox-masked man's perspective, his enemy. At the same time, I had known Aikawa-san for about six months, so, well, in this case, saying I was someone on Aikawa-san's side wasn't necessarily wrong.

Next, when talking about Emoto-san, her situation wasn't normal either. Emoto-san had already betrayed the *Thirteen Stairs* of her own will, cooperated with me and, if I were to put it maliciously, sold out her brethren Migishita Rurero to me—that was her track record.

And, for the one *sold out*, Migishita Rurero, if you thought about it, Rurero-san had also betrayed the *Thirteen Stairs*. If you asked why, it was because the leader of the *Thirteen Stairs*, Saitou Takashi, had directly ordered her that 'If you're told anything by him, don't go against him and betray me.' In other words, the betrayal was not from her own will. Not from her will, but even then, she was still a traitor on the same level as Emoto-san.

The sight of those two, Emoto-san and Rurero-san, sitting next to each other was, to me, as eerie as the sight of Saitou Takashi and Aikawa-san sitting next to each other.

Both traitors—

And with both of them, I was involved.

Although I let them decide of their will, I was not unconcerned.

And the last one, Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Since he was a character that had only appeared yesterday, he was not connected to the other five at all, someone without context—but not really, as Zerozaki Hitoshiki was originally the one Saitou Takashi wanted to *make his enemy,* and in the first place, I was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative. He seemed to have somewhat of a relationship with the former *Thirteen Stair*, Niounomiya Izumu, and most importantly, the presumed culprit of his hypothetical death—Aikawa Jun. Since Zerozaki was alive, we knew that was demagoguery, but it was now

common knowledge that Aikawa Jun and Zerozaki Hitoshiki had fought. That event—especially the second occurrence, was still shrouded in mystery.

Therefore—

Rather than bizarre, it was queer.

Rather than unnatural, supernatural.

There was a relationship.

Between the six people here, there were multiple non-severable and non-snappable connections that could not be untied. Conversely, for all of us to be gathered like this—you could say that it was inevitable. As if this situation came to be by all means possible.

But.

Then—**one more person** was missing, was lacking from here—I should say.

Someone whose presence here should’ve been appropriate.

With her orange hair,

The Orange Seed—Omokage Magokoro.

Magokoro should’ve been here.

"Kukukuh—"

The one who fired the first shot was,

As expected, the fox-masked man.

"—Well, although there are still too many missing people to say that every actor is present... At any rate, this is a rather interesting combination."

Seemingly thinking the same thing as I, the fox-masked man looked over at the five other people pleasantly as he said that line.

Emoto-san and Rurero-san were his *former* subordinates—well, in the case of Rurero-san, she still thought of herself as one, but for now, that's how it was—therefore, the fox-masked man's words felt oppressive. Setting Rurero-san aside, for Emoto-san, it would be more precise to say she was trembling in fear.

But,

Somehow, the more difficult to handle ones were the other two.

For a while, Aikawa-san had been making a very displeased face. Her atmosphere made me refrain from calling out to her. Although we hadn't met in a month, I couldn't even greet her.

It was the same for Zerozaki too, though in his own way—I didn't know what he thought about this situation. The only thing certain was that he persisted in ignoring Emoto-san and Rurero-san. It seemed he occasionally glanced towards Aikawa-san and the fox-masked man, but even then, he basically just sat next to me as if he didn't have a place here. Maybe he felt awkward or that it didn't concern him. There was no telling just from looking at his profile.

By the way,

This is a very important fact. Emoto-san changed from her raincoat to a white blouse over a swimsuit. It seemed to be a rule for her to wear raincoats while outside and swimsuits while inside.

Today was a white bikini.

No one dared to retort about that, but...

"Um..."

We wouldn’t go anywhere if no one ever talked, so I spoke to the fox-masked man after raising my hand.

"For starters—it’s been a while, Mr. Fox."

"'It’s been a while, Mr. Fox'. Hm. Aah, well, yeah. It has certainly been a long time."

The fox-masked man acquiesced.

"Hm—sorry about that. Although I said I wouldn't ever meet you again, sorry for having to show my face again."

"No—I always thought we’d have to meet again anyway... Though it would have been for the best if we didn't. For both of us."

"'For both of us'. Hm. Absolutely."

The fox-masked man sighed.

"So—the one over there is, right...Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Mm, no, since the Zerozaki Clan has been annihilated, shall I call you Migiwame Toshiki?"

"It's Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

Zerozaki answered bluntly.

"I no longer have any other names."

"'I no longer have any other names'. Hm. I see—is that so, is that so, I see, so that is how it is. That is how you see it. Deeply interesting. However, I heard that you had died—"

"Ask this Onee-chan that. Cause I'm not involved in all that."

Zerozaki pointed towards Aikawa-san.

Aikawa-san said,

"Aahn?"

And faced Zerozaki.

She was really displeased.

"No idea. Why should I care? I just happened to fail at killing you, didn't I? Don't get conceited and start pointing at me, you hack. I swear—didn't I tell you to never show up in front of me again, Zerozaki-kun?"

"In this case, it's outside my jurisdiction. What else could it be? I should be the uncaring one here. That being said, I always thought I'd meet you again, though. Tall women like you are really to my liking."

"Oh great. I also really like short, lovely men like you. Go dye your hair black, wear a skirt and confess to me. I'll think about it for ten seconds."

"Hah. What a masterpiece."

Zerozaki said and nonchalantly looked at the ceiling.

...I was nervous about whether those two would have a rematch here, but it didn't seem like that kind of atmosphere, so I calmed down.

That being said, Aikawa-san...

It didn't really seem like her body was in bad condition or her mind was disturbed. If I talked to her, she would normally—like the Aikawa-san I knew, like the usual Aikawa Jun—answer me. Until now, I'd been worried on the inside about the small probably of the same thing Magokoro suffered having been done on her, where she would turn into Saitou Takashi's puppet, but—

Or rather, then.

Why was she so displeased?

My eyes met Aikawa-san's.

Aikawa-san—

"...Ah, no, sorry."

Scratched her head awkwardly towards me.

Different from usual—

But in the same way as usual.

"It seems—I've made you unnecessarily worried, Ii-tan."

"Eh, ah, that's not much of a problem, but—"

"Don't mind it. I just didn't have leeway. My head was just full. Nothing's been done to me—" said Aikawa-san. She then glanced sideways at the fox-masked man. "—It's just that, with a guy like that next to me, I can't drop my guard."

"...Is that so."

A guy like that.

...Father.

I wonder—in this past month,

Between these two, what kind of conversations took place? I had no way to know. There was no way I could know that. As if I would know—it was a conversation between Humanity's Strongest and Humanity's Worst.

Even then, well...

If Aikawa-san was fine, I guess there was no problem.

I'd ask about that later.

More importantly, for now—

"Then..."

The fox-masked man.

"What should we talk about first, my enemy? Both of us have a mountain of things to say and to ask, things we need to say and ask. However, there is only one thing we should be thinking about now—how about it?"

"...Maybe."

What I wanted to ask—

Between Aikawa-san and the Miotsukushi Sisters, there was quite a lot. There was too much, so much that I couldn’t grasp all of it in my head.

However,

Even then, what I should’ve been thinking about for now.

"About Magokoro, Mr. Fox."

I said.

"**What happened—to Magokoro**."

"..."

"According to what I heard from Rurero-san the other day...the *chains* cast on her would not remain forever and their efficiency would fade with time."

"So it seems. Though I didn't know."

"...But earlier, I heard that Tokinomiya Jikoku had cast a double *technique*, and that it’d just been activated now."

"So it seems. Though that too, I didn't know."

"There are two issues."

I said.

"Firstly—what kind of *technique* was it exactly? Secondly—how did Tokinomiya Jikoku cast that *technique* on Magokoro—I absolutely need an answer for that second one."

"How sharp, as usual. You excel in summarizing things. Kukukuh," the fox-masked man laughed. "However, I cannot give an answer to both of them because I simply do not know."

"..."

This person knew nothing, huh...

I turned towards Aikawa-san.

Aikawa-san shook her head as if saying she couldn't handle him.

"Ii-tan."

Then, she called out to me.

"Don't expect anything from **this**. **This thing** doesn't possess any answer Ii-tan wishes for. He's the kind of guy who, despite knowing nothing, while knowing nothing, ruins everything."

"Yes...I understood that just now."

"I also finally got it recently...but this guy really doesn't know anything. Honestly, I feel like I've wasted an absurd amount of time by searching for someone like this."

"..."

"I swear...why is this thing my father? It's a real pain, a bother, it makes me feel sick..."

Then Aikawa-san once again went silent, wearing an irritated face. ...Somehow, looking at Aikawa-san, her attitude might fit in the category of *being embarrassed to have your embarrassing dad being seen*, I thought. How should I put it, like an elementary schooler on Sunday parent's day.

Though, it's not like they broke the ice.

At the very least,

In this moment, only speaking about this instant,

Aikawa-san had no bloodlust.

I didn't know the reasoning behind it, but...

She didn't seem to want to kill her dad.

...However, speaking of that father.

As usual, I couldn't read him.

Was he thinking of his daughter...as his daughter?

This man, who didn't think of people as people.

"Hm."

The fox-masked man said plainly.

"Well, I may certainly know nothing, but—I have *limbs* for this kind of situation. Hey, isn't that right, Doctor, Rurero."

"Yeah."

The one who raised her voice was Rurero-san.

"I still don't know for sure, but—I have a grasp on what's happened in general."

Those were strong words.

Competent underlings for an incompetent leader.

Guaah, from the side I heard a yawn.

It was Zerozaki.

"Hey, Ii-tan."

"Don't you call me Ii-tan. What is it?"

"I'm sleepy, so can I sleep? Honestly, it seems like a story that doesn't really concern me is about to start."

"..."

I thought "What does he think he's saying in such a tense situation", but he really did seem sleepy. Zerozaki's eyes were drowsy. Thinking about it, he had to pull through an all nighter starting yesterday—it might have been his thoughtfulness to consider this a situation where he couldn't sleep brazenly in front of everybody.

"...There are beds on the second floor."

Emoto-san was the one to say it.

"Err...the bed on one side is still used by Rurero-san so use the other one. The one in the back after climbing the stairs."

"...Sankyuu."

Saying that, Zerozaki stood up. Although those were words of gratitude, you could still feel Zerozaki's caution against Emoto-san. He was somehow able to raise his hips.

"You know where the stairs are?"

"I can find something like that in the blink of an eye—despite looking like this, my sense of direction and observational skills are quite high. On that note, see ya."

Zerozaki hurriedly passed behind Emoto-san and Rurero-san's back and turned towards the sliding screen. Then, when he was about to grab that screen,

"Aah, right, right."

He—

Called out to the fox-masked man.

"Hey, you."

"...What is it, Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

The fox-masked man answered without turning back.

However, the tone of his voice—it felt differently than normal.

"It's something I don't really care about, and I wouldn't want people to think I was curious about it if I asked, but even then, I'll ask, just in case. Were you the one behind the Zerozaki Clan's annihilation?"

"..."

The fox-masked man didn't say anything for a while,

"Well, you are right."

He said.

“To be precise, it wasn't me, but Omokage Magokoro, though."

"...Hmm."

"They were perfect opponents to test her strength on, you see—after all, once you kill one, they show up one after the other. It was easy to keep it a secret."

"Is that so."

Zerozaki said.

He then stepped over the doorstep and took a step in the exterior of the room.

"...Don't you have any hatred? Towards me, who killed your family."

"Not really. Not like I thought of those guys as family."

"Even then, you still name yourself Zerozaki."

"The kanji are cool. I took a liking to it somehow. That’s all. There's nothing else. Aah, also, Humanity's Strongest."

"Aahn?"

Being called,

Aikawa-san turned back and looked at Zerozaki.

Zerozaki,

"The promise I made, I kept it."

He said.

"At least till now. But **she probably did too**."

"..."

"I have no guarantee, but I intend to continue keeping it. And she too, probably."

Aikawa-san looked curiously at Zerozaki for a while.

"I see."

She nodded.

"Thanks for your hard work."

"...Not at all. Don't concern yourself."

Then Zerozaki closed the screen.

Eventually, we heard feet climbing the stairs.

"..."

It was only a ten second conversation, but in this conversation between a demonic killer, Humanity's Worst, and Humanity's Strongest, it had too many components for me to grasp.

Only consisting of things I didn't understand.

Even then—

I at least understood that Magokoro was the one who annihilated the Zerozaki Clan. There was no denying it. Kouta-san didn't say a word about it, but—well, she probably knew. Though I couldn’t decide whether the decision to not tell me was out of kindness or malice.

I had faintly sensed it.

I had heavily tried to deny it.

"Hm—I see, so that kind of personality. That kind of personality, huh. The Zerozaki Clan's annihilation was mainly to test out Magokoro's strength, but I also thought it might bring out the potentially alive Zerozaki Hitoshiki—but with him being like that, I guess it was impossible."

"Mr. Fox... Did you think—that Zerozaki might have been alive?"

"No, I concluded he was dead. In the end, it was just in case. You need to try things out. But having seen him directly—I see, that guy must have had a

direct connection with Izumu... However, that is somewhat faint for having a connection with me.

Now, the fox-masked man said.

"I wonder what kind of connection ties him to me—since I remembered nothing having seen his face, there is a strong possibility for someone to be between us... Hm. It would be interesting if it were Hagihara Shiogi—but I shouldn't expect that. It would be too good to be true. Since I am not connected to Hagihara Shiogi... Hm. Then who could it be..."

Like Aikawa-san and Magokoro being between the fox-masked man and me, there was someone between the fox-masked man and Zerozaki—even if that were the case, there would probably be no way to know that at this point—but even then, I was curious.

When we were on this digression,

"Umm."

To my surprise, it was Emoto-san who sent us back on track.

"Rurero-san... Still, has not completely recovered—so when this conversation ends, she will need to rest again...so end, the conversation, quickly."

"As usual, you only have eyes for injured and ill people, Doctor. It's even refreshing. Fine—I shall think about Zerozaki at a later date. Rurero, continue—actually, I want to know too."

"Yeah. Got it—you should also listen in, okay, Aikawa-san?"

"I know. It's not like I was considering whether I should hit the bed too."

Looks like she was.

You can’t let your guard down with her.

Rurero-san sighed—

And turned to me.

"In the first place, the trigger was—"

2

That was the first trigger, the first doubt Rurero-san held. One so faint you could easily miss it—it seems.

A little while after entering contact with me on the fifteenth of October—when her body had recovered enough to be freed of complete reliance on Emoto-san for most of her actions—

She apparently had a brief doubt.

"Is that really—all?"

She thought, disappointed.

I had also thought that—during these two weeks, it has been a thought constantly on my mind. Not only about the way the war with the fox-masked man ended, but also the fact that Magokoro's *chains* could be lifted by simply waiting—although it took effort to cast it, how could lifting it be so effortless—I had thought that, unsatisfied.

But I accepted that disappointment.

I thought, "That's just how it is.".

That is how society is.

That is how the world is.

That is how, in most cases, the Story is.

However—Rurero-san didn't accept that. This was not the first case of the fox-masked man's whimsicalness. That must have been clear to Rurero-san even before entering the *Thirteen Stairs*, and even setting aside the fox-masked man's, Saitou Takashi's, declaration of war to me—

The Orange Seed.

There was a problem for—Omokage Magokoro.

Kino Raichi.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Even though herself and two *Cursing Names* were involved—wasn't the conclusion too abrupt?

That's what she thought.

No, it wasn't really strange. This case wasn't special, it had always been this way—whether it be the nature of Kino-san's *poison*, the fact that Thought Manipulation lost effectiveness over time, or the condition that her own *training* had no meaning if she didn't constantly apply it—those were the normal, natural rules. It was natural like that.

That's why—it was unnatural.

Just because, until then, the conditions hadn't been met—there were no doubts or errors—that it was just because Magokoro, who **just happened to be** the target for those chains, escaped.

However,

When she thought that—

When she began to think that, an unnatural feeling must have come to her.

"...When Magokoro escaped from your surveillance—by chance, Tokinomiya Jikoku was absent—that's the fact in question, right?"

After I said that in anticipation,

"Exactly."

Rurero-san agreed.

Of course, it's not like this kind of opportunity wasn't present before—one of those three must have left at some point. Therefore, thinking that Magokoro aimed for a moment where someone was absent to escape would be a normal way of thinking, and thinking that Tokinomiya jikoku's will was at work was unreasonable.

However,

It was that line of reasoning that Rurero-san doubted.

On top of doubting, she remembered.

No, in this case, saying that she doubted because **that** had left a strong impression would be more accurate.

That is—

When he was in front of Kino-san and Rurero-san—just after casting the third *chain* on Magokoro—what Tokinomiya Jikoku said.

'As an experiment, I want to inquire something to you two—'

Right, Tokinomiya Jikoku started like that.

In a way indistinguishable from usual.

'How exactly would you describe **that**?'

'Isn't that obvious—' Kino-san answered. 'That is the so-called *Humanity's Last*—the ultimate form of humanity, right? One that could win over that Contractor, *Humanity's Strongest*, as an existence—even outdoing Mr. Fox, *Humanity's Worst*—right?'

'Exactly. Exactly exact, right on point. Completely exact. If you swallow Mr. Fox's explanation without any questions, that is correct. However—I wonder, what do you think? If, hypothetically, that Orange Seed were to be something of that kind—do you not think that would already be a form of *the world's end*?'

'...'

'...'

Without caring about Kino-san and Rurero-san's silence, Tokinomiya Jikoku seamlessly continued.

'In the first place—The Orange Seed was designed in the enormous, integrated, and united research facility to be Overkill Red's successor. So if Overkill Red—Death Colored Crimson, was a failed attempt from Mr. Fox to achieve his objective, *the world's end*—then wouldn't the successful product, The Orange Seed, already be *the end of the world* by her existence alone?'

Magokoro is—the world's end.

That is—

Certainly, I hadn't thought about it, but you couldn't simply dismiss it as a farfetched argument.

'But even then, Mr. Fox only uses The Orange Seed as an opponent for *Ii-chan*, as a foil—he even uses us three to *chain* her, overlapping restrictions upon restrictions. How do you feel about this fact?'

Depending on the time, place and situation, it would have been a somewhat respectable opinion—however, even if that expression was a little

misplaced for Kino-kun and Rurero-san, they basically idolized the fox-masked man, they were on the side of the *Thirteen Stairs* that agreed with his views—

Tokinomiya's words ended after a smile.

Tokinomiya Jikoku didn't put that much importance into what he had told these two. Far from that, he acted as if that was merely the preamble—

'Right.'

Then, he brought up the next topic, apparently.

'Raichi-kun. You just called The Orange Seed the ultimate form of humanity, but I wonder about that. Is that really it? In the first place, is there really an ultimate form of what we call a human and recognize as one?'

'Is that it, you say—she's right before your eyes, so I guess you have to accept it,' Kino-san answered. 'To begin with, we were only just able to seal her power with all three of us working together, weren't we? Don't tell me you've has forgotten that enormous power, Tokinomiya-san—'

'Her stamina sapped with Raichi-san's *poison*. Her body bound with Rurero-san's *training*. And her mind controlled with my *Thought Manipulation*—each of us restrained her. ...However, is that really all it takes? Something that can be restrained with **just us three banding together**—is it really fine to call that Humanity's Last? That is what I think. That is how I approached it.'

Hearing the word "just", Kino-san went pale—and it apparently wasn't a pleasant opinion for Rurero-san either.

Don't misunderstand me, Tokinomiya Jikoku continued.

It seems.

'I just want to say that—**in reality, The Orange Seed** is on a much higher level.'

'On a much higher...level?'

'In a whole other dimension, would probably be more correct—that violence, which was already overwhelming for us—without even having to use the wounds Rurero-san received as proof, even that overwhelming

power—what if that was something already restricted beforehand by The Orange Seed herself?'

'Restri—cted?'

'By chains.'

Tokinomiya Jikoku said.

'There is a possibility The Orange Seed is unconsciously suppressing herself.'

'...'

'Of course, she is also doing it consciously...but it's probably a problem related to the personality installed in her. The one who *unlocked* The Orange Seed is our current enemy. *Ii-chan*, isn't it? Then—I would deduce he exerts some kind of influence there. Deeply interesting—the personality *Ii-chan* bestowed to the Orange Seed.'

'However—mister,' unable to put up with this any longer, Rurero-san said, 'isn't there no way to verify whether the Orange Seed is unconsciously restraining herself? It could go both ways—'

'As you know, I am someone who manipulates minds, so I can deduce that much—well, I think I can do it with more precision than you two, at least. Naturally, I cannot deny that *the world's end* could be brought about by a mere powered up version of Humanity's Strongest over a few patterns, I cannot deny that. I would not be committed enough to affirm it, but I cannot deny it either.'

'...What do you want to say?'

To Kino-san's question—

Tokinomiya Jikoku smiled, delighted.

As if he was waiting for that question wholeheartedly.

'Why, I just thought that would be pitiful. If the existence called the Orange Seed, Humanity's Last, humanity's ultimate form—is not able to achieve her goal, to do what she wants, because of her timid and fragile personality—

If she is afraid of something.

That would be too pitiful.'

'...'

'...'

In front of those speechless two—

Tokinomiya shrugged his shoulders jokingly.

'Setting that aside—you two want to see it too, right? What Mr. Fox calls *the world's end*. So then you must understand, the idea of having that very thing be right in front of me and not thinking about it—is not something I can do. I cannot do it. As a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, and as *Tokinomiya Jikoku*—you see.'

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

When talking about his affiliation, he apparently had the habit of not just cutting it to *Tokinomiya*, but saying the full name—*Tokinomiya Jikoku*.

The name bestowed upon an exiled one.

"...Anyway."

Rurero-san said.

She thought of it as gossip—also, this conversation took place only a short while after she had met Kino-kun and Tokinomiya Jikoku, so Rurero-san only thought that he "seems like a weird person," and brushed it aside—

But now that it came to it,

Now that the situation came to this state—it was fishy.

Suspicious.

And it being just after having casted his *technique* for the first time—that fact also felt strange.

However, after the declaration of war was announced and the *Thirteen Stairs* got scattered, meaning that they had no means to contact each other, she wasn't able to question Tokinomiya Jikoku—therefore, during the past week, Rurero-san had been constantly carrying these doubts.

However—

Even then, no matter what Tokinomiya Jikoku did to Magokoro—no matter what kind of *Thought Manipulation* he used behind Kino-san and Rurero-san's back—if those *techniques* were not regularly cast, they would naturally weather away. No matter how strong or persistent the technique was, that was an absolute. In the first place, the concept of manipulating minds—which is called *Thought Manipulation*—is established upon these rules.

Not a weak point but a foundation.

That was why it should have been safe.

Right, that's why she told herself that—and it seemed that her act of self persuasion was successful, which led to her in the end not transmitting her doubts to Emoto-san.

But—just yesterday.

The thirty-first of October.

There was a message from the *Thirteen Stairs*' Ichirizuka Konomi to this very former Saitou Clinic—Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility.

In short,

I managed to catch wind of Tokinomiya Jikoku's plan.

He escaped in the middle of the conversation—

But we must obstruct his plan.

Using the Miotsukushi Sisters.

You two—will assure Mr. Fox's safety—

And investigate the state of Omokage Magokoro—

"Hurry up. You already might not make it in time—those were Konomi's words."

"I see."

The one who nodded the most was the fox-masked man. I couldn't see with his mask, but it felt like he was smiling underneath.

"So, Konomi grasped something. As per usual, even when I don't ask for anything, she's a restless and cute fellow. She reminds me of the hamster I kept as a child. Although I didn't give it a name. Right, let's name that hamster Konomi-chan. Good grief, at this rate, maybe I should have entrusted the surveillance/investigation of my enemy to Konomi instead of Nureginu... So, Rurero. What did Konomi tell you?"

"I don't know the details, but-"

"Even then, Konomi must have grasped something sufficient to make you, who was still uncertain, move. Explain. Even I am confused, you know—deranging our special parent and daughter meeting like that. How boorish. Right, Jun?"

"Don't call me by my first name."

"But the people who call you by your last name are enemies, right?"

"In your case, no matter what you call me, you're an enemy."

Aikawa-san suddenly turned sideways.

Somehow, they seemed to get along—parent and daughter meeting... What exactly had those two been doing and where? Believing the fox-masked man's words, there was no doubt they weren't in Kyoto...

In other words, having received the message from Ichirizuka Konomi, Rurero-san and Emoto-san first went to protect the fox-masked man—and they also took Aikawa-san, who was there as well, along too—then they came to search for Magokoro at the rundown apartment. After all, it was already evident to the *Thirteen Stairs* that Magokoro was living in that apartment.

That meant, if Rurero-san and Emoto-san headed towards the apartment before taking the fox-masked man—which would've been understandable since it should have been the shortest route, distance wise—the apartment's destruction may have been avoided. However, that was the order of priority among the *Thirteen Stairs*, so it couldn't be helped.

However...

Speaking of yesterday, it was also the day when I was about to get killed by the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi—if it weren't for the now asleep Zerozaki, I would have certainly lost my life.

Without being able to part with Kunagisa.

I should have been dead.

I wonder, time-wise, which happened first, between that and Rurero-san being contacted? Thinking about how Ichirizuka Konomi's personality seemed according to Izumu-kun—hmm. At the very least, from seeing their reactions up until now, it seemed that neither Rurero-san, Emoto-san nor the fox-masked man knew that I was on the verge of getting killed last night by the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi...

That being said, it was difficult to say that in the current mood...

They would think I was a guy with no cooperativeness.

"Protecting me—since that's what Konomi said, we can at least assume that something capable of harming me has appeared—but still, what in the world has Jikoku done? There's no way to progress without understanding that."

"I do not know how to describe that action. I don't know how to say it. But there's no doubt that it was an act of disloyalty towards Mr. Fox—"

"It was not infidelity, nor betrayal," the fox-masked man said. "After all, I only managed to make him enter the *Thirteen Stairs* under the condition of *allowing various liberties*. Even actions that would normally be considered betrayal were included in the contract."

"...Aah, is that so."

Rurero-san looked fed up with the fox-masked man, but as expected of someone used to his behavior, she just continued talking.

"Tokinomiya—

"Planned Magokoro-chan's release.

"Not her restraint—her release."

"..."

Magokoro's—release.

Setting Magokoro free.

One of the three chains cast on the Orange Seed, composing the refined *Thought Manipulation*, Tokinomiya Jikoku—on his own, wished for the Orange Seed's release?

However, even if we're talking about release.

There were too many meanings to that.

An uncountable amount.

"For a man who manipulates minds, that kind of method is more plausible. Rather than **not letting it act as it wants—letting it act as it wants**—is probably much easier."

"And that end result...was a rampage?"

I muttered.

Not restraint, but release.

Not a rampage, but release.

Let's say that, as I was told in front of the collapsed apartment earlier—a posthypnotic suggestion was cast on Magokoro so that it would activate when Kino-san's *poison* and Rurero-san's *technique* completely faded away—

Then.

As Tokinomiya Jikoku told Kino-san and Rurero-san, if Magokoro was suppressing herself unconsciously as Humanity's Last—

Rampage.

Release.

One's desire.

Was that—

Was that what Magokoro wanted to do?

Was...that Magokoro's desire?

Then—

"..."

I...

We.

How many feelings—

Were we able to save in Magokoro?

How much self-control did we force on Magokoro?

I said things like "I will set you free"—but what I did was no different from what Kino-san, Rurero-san, or the fox-masked man—or that ER3 System's MS-2 did—that's what it is.

The result—an uncontrollable recoil.

The result.

Involving everybody...

And—

Magokoro even escaped from me.

She...went somewhere.

But...

Even though it looked like she was having so much fun.

"Hm."

The fox-masked man said.

"However, I can't understand it. How did Jikoku use his Thought Manipulation on Magokoro? He shouldn't have had a chance to make contact with Magokoro ever since the tenth of October."

"Exactly."

"Even with something like a posthypnotic suggestion—the underlying problem remains. Or perhaps—that Jikoku, did he sneak into my enemy's apartment? And he was caught by Konomi there—"

"That is impossible."

I asserted.

"Outside contact is impossible for that apartment. If I can add to that, there was also the Kunagisa Syndicate's guard—"

"Hm. It’s quite interesting that you consider the Kunagisa Syndicate’s guard as a side point. It sounds like a joke. It sounds like a nightmare. However, then—what does this mean, Rurero?"

"The answer is simple and clear—even I, when I first heard it from Konomi, was caught off guard," Rurero-san said in a low voice. "**If you have to continue applying the hypnosis to not let the effectiveness fade—just continue applying it**. Just that simple logic."

Hearing Rurero-san's words—

Everyone was left speechless.

No, rather than speechless—we just didn't understand what she meant. Of course we didn't, because that argument had no meaning topologically. It's the same as saying "if you don't have food, why not just eat food?" Like answering "you should just fly in the sky" when someone asks how to fly in the sky. No reasonable answer can be found there.

"Wha-what does this mean, Rurero-san..."

Emoto-san asked.

...You don't know either?

Setting the fox-masked man aside, I assumed that at least Emoto-san had heard beforehand...but maybe Rurero-san didn't know what to say. Even now, it seemed like she was thinking while talking—also, realizing that her current words were lacking, "Uum," she closed her eyes for a bit.

"In other words—hypnosis is, errr, in short, something like controlling the mind's rhythm—well, although hypnosis and Thought Manipulation are similar, they are still their own thing—look, isn't there one, when you become gradually sleepier."

"...The one where you swing a five yen coin in front of your eyes?"

"Right right. 'You become more and more sleepy'."

"Hm. Hallucination by sensory deprivation," the fox-masked man said. "Numbing the mind with monotone movement, that kind of hypnosis. Well,

that's a foundation even for the *Tokinomiya*'s Thought Manipulation techniques. However, what about that?"

"So—you need to match the consciousness level to that hypnotism's rhythm—you need to fix it in place. That's what it is."

Rurero-san said meekly.

"If you constantly fixate Magokoro-chan's consciousness on **something, the first Thought Manipulation he cast would not be released**."

Rhythm—

The Thought Manipulation's beat?

I see, even if the caster themself wasn't always nearby, if you set it so that her mind was always responding to the rhythm of something, then...there was no need to cast the technique over and over...?

No, that would still have the same root problem as the posthypnotic suggestion.

Someday, when enough time passes, it would be released.

Also, if you go over the line with hypnosis, someday you will get used to it and the effect will be lesser—I’ve heard that’s a possibility. It's not about Kino-san, but it's the same as getting accustomed to antidotes and poisons... If you compare the rhythm to music, it's like getting bored of a melody—

Consciousness.

"That's wrong."

Rurero-san finally seemed to enter the conclusion.

"Not that...more simply.

“You just need to let the rhythm on.

“You just need to let the Thought Manipulation on.

“You just need to make a neutral rhythm your basis—

“—That's how it is."

"...**Letting it on**?"

Letting it on.

What does letting it on mean?

"Aah—I see."

The one to agree the fastest was Aikawa-san.

Her expression—was irritated from the bottom of her heart.

"...So that's how it is. That's certainly fitting for a *Cursing Name*—keh. Makes me feel nauseous."

"Jun-san—what do you mean?"

"In other words, if you let the pendulum swing forever in front of you, the Thought Manipulation won't have time to fade away—that is, if the logic is to make the person remember the rhythm. A hypnosis without breaks. Hah—I see, there's no weakness. There's no way to release it in a state like that. There's a guy thinking crazy stuff."

"What do you mean? Explain, Jun."

"..."

...It seems the fox-masked man still hadn't understood.

Perhaps that person was no good.

Aikawa-san turned towards Rurero-san without answering her father's demand and, with a gesture of her chin, ordered her to explain. The haughtiness of commanding one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, the fox-masked man's *limbs*, like that, even in such a situation, made me feel relieved.

But—upon hearing Rurero-san's next words,

That feeling—would freeze.

"**The heart's rhythm**."

Rurero-san pointed at her own chest and said.

"Using her heartbeat as a base—Magokoro was put under the control of the Thought Manipulation."

"H-heart...!"

Her heartbeat—as a base.

Then—no, calm down, then, that would mean, what would that mean? I can intuitively understand that this is something absurd, but I can't seem to fully understand what that exactly means.

Err—

Be it Magokoro or Humanity's Last, the existence that can surpass everything, the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro—since she was human... Even if you're not human, even if you are a monster, as long as you are alive, there is no way your heart isn't beating.

And the heart is an involuntary muscle.

It cannot move as you want.

That's why—even if it is inside your body, even if it is a core part of your body, it possesses the particularity of not being controllable and being an organ of the highest importance.

Making that rhythm a base is—

"**Always on—and neutral**."

We were not searching for an exterior source—

But for an interior source.

So that's how it was.

"Hold on a minute...that's...more than being a secret technique—isn't it practically a banned move—"

I, powerlessly—filled with despair, muttered.

"What a technique... Then it would have been way better to not release the three chains..."

"I completely agree."

Next to Rurero-san saying that, Emoto-san wholeheartedly agreed. Aikawa-san was, needless to say, still making a displeased expression.

The fox-masked man—

"Hm."

Showed his usual reaction.

Without seeming particularly moved—rather, his reaction looked as if he was feeling refreshed that his question had been solved.

"I see—her heart, huh. That was a blind spot. Talking about a fixed rhythm to engrave a base—there is no other bodily watch that can surpass the heart—that being said, that was only possible because the heart in question was Magokoro's. Because, for normal people, the rate of one's heartbeat can easily fluctuate. Hm, he skillfully grasped Humanity's Last's ultimate aspect—"

"After all, it's meaningless if not for a case like this," Aikawa-san said after the fox-masked man. "Does that Thought Manipulation stay effective forever after being activated, Puppeteer-san?"

"...I have no idea."

"You're both experts, aren't you?"

"Though that's true..."

"Then predict."

"Well...it will probably end after being activated—Tokinomiya didn't use *techniques* gentle enough for that to be the case. It was probably like the reflex of Pavlov's dog—

The hypnosis will stay effective until her heart stops.

At the current point, if her *mind* is completely dominated, there shouldn't be anything we can do—that's what the fox-masked man said earlier, but hearts usually don't have much of a difference between people, unless they have a disease, their rhythm can't change that much. Therefore, in this case, even more so for Magokoro-chan—I guess."

"..."

Until her heart stopped—

If you were to rephrase that, wouldn't that be **until she died**?

Until—her life until now, a life that had always been so dominated that even she didn't know her exact age—until Omokage Magokoro's life ended.

The fact that he laid out an unbreakable chain that wouldn't allow her to escape the domination of the Thought Manipulation—

Even setting allies or enemies aside, it was unforgivable.

Unforgivable.

I thought that.

And at the same time, a dark feeling was pressing in on me.

An absolutely unbreakable—hypnosis.

Control of the mind.

"Nah, not control—" Rurero-san said. "Not control. This is a release. Because it is a release—he can use such absurdly powerful techniques, such absurd Thought Manipulation becomes possible."

"'Becomes possible'. Hm. I see, I was able to understand—the reason why Jikoku did something so extreme and probably awfully time consuming—"

Kukukuh, he laughed pleasantly.

Pleasantly, regardless of the situation.

Really—

Did this person have no heart?

"Rurero—Sonoki. I can only conjecture what your opinions on the matter must be—but Jikoku. Tokinomiya Jikoku, Thought Manipulator. He was—among the members of the *Thirteen Stairs*, the thirteen including Akira, no, even including the past members, Rizumu and Izumu—

"The only one—

"Who really wanted to see the end of the world.

"Not swearing loyalty towards me, interested in me, bartering or following his own desires—he was the only man with the same unswayable and unbreakable conviction as me. Rurero—"

The fox-masked man turned his words towards Rurero-san.

"You might understand about half of Jikoku's feelings—at the very least, you seemed to wish for the end of the world, the end of the Story. Well, Noise

might have been in a closer position with his habit of saying how much he wanted to die—however, neither of you have the same purity as Jikoku."

"Tokinomiya—Jikoku."

"In the same way the *Thirteen Stairs* were *limbs* to let me see the end of the world, to let me finish reading the Story—for Jikoku, my existence was a *means*... To see the end of the world, to finish reading the Story."

Tokinomiya Jikoku—he was the only person whose reason for joining the *Thirteen Stairs* was still a mystery to me. Deep down I thought it might have been a similar reason to that—but I didn't think **it could have been that reason**.

Then—

Considering what Rurero-san said.

"So—even if he cast that kind of Thought Manipulation on Magokoro—well, it's not as mysterious anymore. In case I screwed up on getting the **possible** *end of the world* that was on hand, he prepared to still be able to see *the end of the world*—thinking from Jikoku's position, that should be about it. Though that still leaves out the reason for letting Magokoro escape from the *Thirteen Stairs*—it's unclear, I think. After all, at that point, my strategy against my enemy was going nearly perfectly."

"..."

I wonder—about that.

By the time I was shown to Magokoro in Sumiyuri Academy's second gymnasium—Magokoro's escape was nearly decided, so in this case, I feel like you would normally see it as Jikoku simply creating an occasion for that. That being said, what the fox-masked man said wasn't completely off the mark—

About that—

I guess we had to ask the person in question...

Tokinomiya Jikoku himself.

"Any contact from Konomi after that?"

"Aah, err..." Rurero-san hesitated over the fox-masked man's words before answering. "Nothing for the moment—but we're talking about Konomi. I doubt she went to pursue Jikoku alone—she said she would use the Miotsukushi Sisters..."

...Ichirizuka Konomi.

Having had no contact with her since yesterday, perhaps—she had had the tables turned on her by Tokinomiya Jikoku. Being the *Space Creator*, she probably didn't have much fighting ability—no, but the Miotsukushi Sisters...

Umm.

Since I was attacked by those three at the Imperial Garden, I couldn’t think calmly. Thinking normally, then, was that also an aspect of Tokinomiya Jikoku's pursuit...?

However, why...

"Hm. Well, there shouldn't be any worries for Konomi."

Ignoring my thoughts, the fox-masked man said carefreely, not even with any special trust.

Speaking of that—

At that time, on this second floor, he asserted to Rurero-san—that Ichirizuka Konomi wouldn't betray him.

That also seemed different from trust—

But it was similar to trust.

To the point you could correctly call it that.

"—Alright, Rurero. I understand well. I will give you my thanks—take care of yourself now. Go to the second floor and rest."

"Ah, no...Mr. Fox. I'm fine, this kind of injury—it's already nearly healed..."

"Is that so? Doctor?"

"No way."

For some reason, Emoto-san answered to Mr. Fox by making an overreaction, turning her neck and spreading out her arms.

"In reality, you shouldn't even be standing up or walking. Rurero-san, you are only forcing your body to walk by using your body like a puppet."

"Shut up... Our bodies are trained differently. Don't measure me by your normal standards."

"I am properly using Rurero-san standards."

"You know, I'm thankful for you attending to and treating me, but it's annoying when you're so clingy."

"Even if I am annoying, injuries come first. Don't be selfish like a kid, Rurero-san."

...Ooh.

Emoto-san wouldn't step back when injuries were involved...

Normally, if you told her she was annoying, she would immediately start crying, but now she talked like a reliable doctor. Even though she was wearing a white blouse and bikini.

"...Fine, I got it."

Saying that, Rurero-san raised her hips unwillingly and reluctantly. Emoto-san swiftly supported her from the side. With nonchalant but flawless moves.

"On that note, we will go to the second floor—hey, Ikkun."

"Yes?"

"That tattoo boy, Zerozaki Hitoshiki-kun, he doesn't have any injuries, does he?"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Like a chronic disease or the aftereffect of an injury?"

"...? I don't think he has anything like that."

"I see. Then he really was sleepy... Mm. Then let's go, Rurero-san. Want to stop by the toilet?"

"Don't ask that in front of people..."

...

Rurero-san was seriously being treated like a child.

They really were a great combination...

Those two exited the waiting room in that manner, then—

Then.

On the tatami mat, around the tea table, three people.

Three people were left.

Humanity's Strongest and Humanity's Worst and Humanity's Weakest.

Aikawa Jun and Saitou Takashi and—and me.

Well, in this case—

You could say the actors were all present, now that there were less people.

"...I’ve been wondering about it since we were in the car, but Ii-tan, why does that doctor call you Ikkun so familiarly?"

An unexpectedly sharp question came flying from Aikawa-san.

Err—how much did the fox-masked man know... From how he acted, it didn't look like he knew that Emoto-san betrayed him *for real*, but—umm, if he didn't know, it was better to hide it.

We were already in this situation, it couldn’t become even more complicated.

As if I would let it become more complicated.

A more complicated situation couldn’t even exist.

In the first place—

The war between the fox-masked man and I was already over. Us meeting here was an incredible irregularity, so—

"Be...because we're mail buddies."

"..."

"..."

Uwaah, I screwed up.

That's painful in modern days...

To begin with, I couldn’t type emails.

"More importantly, Jun-san, what were you doing? We were all worried. Hikari-san was so worried she even entrusted her flesh to me—"

"Don't say flesh. It sounds lewd."

The forbidden technique of answering a question with another was unexpectedly effective. Aikawa-san acted awkwardly. "Everyone was worried" worked surprisingly well.

"Well, a lot..."

"..."

It seems she didn't want to talk about it.

Hm, the fox-masked man—removed his mask.

Laid out the fox mask on the table.

Ooh...it was the first time I saw them lined up, but as expected, looking at them like that—they looked more like twins than father and daughter...

Even surpassing the difference in gender and the age gap.

What was it...

Was it because their existences were similar?

Not on the outside, but on the inside.

Well, maybe it was simply because the fox-masked man looked much younger than his real age.

"Now, I'm at a loss."

The fox-masked man said.

"Things have become extraordinarily bothersome."

"...That sounds like a weak statement coming from you, Mr. Fox. At the very least, that's the first time—I see you take that attitude."

"I am still a human. Even I can get troubled. Hey, my enemy. That is troubling. The connection between you and me is too deep and firm. That in itself brought me the utmost joy when declaring war—but when the war has been over for half a month and the connection still isn't severed, it's quite a bother."

"That's a really selfish way to put it..."

Are you an easily bored seventeen year old maiden? Just the other day you were dancing with joy for every common point we had...

It wasn't really for revenge, but I said.

"Rather, what cannot be cut is the connection with Magokoro, isn't it, Mr. Fox?"

"...Hm. You say whatever you want, don't you?"

The fox-masked man said.

Then, continuing—he said something outrageous.

"However... About that, well, you can nearly—say that it is over."

"...What do you mean?"

"That Magokoro—that Humanity's Last *rampaged*, you know—I have no means to stop that. To be frank, in the bottom of my heart, I thought that if I left Magokoro in your care, she wouldn't rampage, my enemy. In addition to being Magokoro's scabbard—you are also the key after all."

"Even without me—Magokoro would rampage in the future."

"Think whatever you want."

The fox-masked man went silent after saying that.

I was displeased with his attitude.

After Emoto-san and Rurero-san left the room—he somehow relaxed... But what meaning did it have?

"...? I thought that—you were thinking along the lines of 'whether Magokoro rampages or not, it's the same in the end', but—is that wrong?"

"It is. Setting Jikoku aside—about Magokoro. It's completely wrong. You brought up two issues, right? What kind of technique and how did he cast it, right? The answer to these two is now clear. *A technique releasing Magokoro* and *posthypnotic suggestion with the heart's rhythm*. Then—with those answers sorted out, a new question appears. In other words—"

"**What will Magokoro do next**?"

At that point—Aikawa-san butted in.

Looking so displeased she might click her tongue.

"What—next?"

"'What will the released Magokoro wish for?' Ii-tan, Omokage Magokoro—the complete form of myself, the Orange Seed, what do you think she will wish for, from the heart, after being released?"

"..."

From the heart.

From the heart, what will Magokoro wish for—

Being continuously oppressed.

Constantly, constantly, continuously.

She couldn't even survive without restraining herself—like Kunagisa Tomo. Being perfect, she had to wish for something imperfect in order to live. What will Magokoro, who had to wish to be unhappy, wish from her heart—

"—Revenge."

...I said.

"At first, probably—revenge."

She doesn't resent—she said.

She doesn't really care, she said.

However—that was just lip service.

I won't say lip service is bad. Rather, it’s good.

But—

The style of Humanity's Last, being unchallenged and undefeated—is definitely not something Magokoro wished for on her own.

Like Hime-chan's act, a way to get by.

Like Kunagisa's restrictions, a technique to survive.

How was Magokoro—

Was she virtuous?

Was she just virtuous?

If she wasn't only virtuous.

Then—

If those chains were removed.

If she were removed—from various dominations and oppressions, I was sure Magokoro would wish for revenge. She should. No, it was doubtful whether there would be enough emotion in her purpose for it to be called revenge. Magokoro had received too much persecution—to use the word revenge, to use words like revenge, atonement, grudge, resentment or venting out.

Like my defunct little sister.

Then—that was no longer revenge.

That was destruction.

Thorough destruction.

Without any mercy, any hesitation, unavoidable—thorough and overwhelming destruction work, destruction impetus.

Without mercy nor hesitance—

Destruction.

Transgression.

"...But if that—if that was Magokoro's true desire—that would be too sad."

I said.

"Then—wouldn't that mean that none of us—were able to comprehend her true emotions?"

"That kind of thing isn't something we can comprehend." The fox-masked man said coldly. "So the problem is the target of that revenge—my enemy. I have no idea of how long Magokoro's destruction impetus will last—even then, there are three targets that will certainly be attacked for revenge and get destroyed."

"Three—"

"**Myself. The ER3 System. And—you.**"

The fox-masked man's words—after all this time.

I came to think they didn't compound any emotion.

"If she were to resent anything, it would be those three."

"..."

"No matter what you think."

I—had nothing to say.

I didn't know what to say.

However—

At the very least, I thought it was correct.

From Magokoro's position—absolutely.

Because she probably cursed the world she was born in.

"...You reap what you sow. Nothing more than that."

Aikawa-san said, as if it was someone else's business.

"All the idiocies you did finally came to bite you back. Both this shitty father and Ii-tan. Well, it might directly be Tokinomiya Jikoku's fault, but even then, I have no words of sympathy."

"Hm. That is true."

The fox-masked man agreed with his daughter's words.

"In reality—if the released Magokoro becomes my enemy, I have zero chance of winning. So I have no other choice than to be still and wait to be killed like a carp on a chopping board."

"Ahahah. Serves you right!"

Aikawa-san...

All of a sudden, she seemed to be having fun...

"...After all, the Orange Seed was able to bring down my outdated daughter in one strike, even with multiple restrictions."

The fox-masked man unexpectedly fought back.

Aikawa-san's smile froze.

"Mm. Reminds me, how long will you still name yourself Humanity's Strongest after losing that flashily?"

"...Ugh."

Aikawa-san flinched.

I thought it was an ill-mannered way to phrase it and that it didn't really have to be said, but what the fox-masked man said was certainly true.

"After being humiliated so much, I'd be too embarrassed to name myself Humanity's Strongest. Mm, hey, Jun, what do you think about that? Are you going to be called Humanity's Second Strongest Contractor from now on?"

"—No."

Aikawa-san swayed her head in a big motion.

Somehow she looked like a big shot.

"Not at all."

Aikawa-san said "Not at all".

"Not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all."

Aikawa-san said "Not at all" ten times.

"Yes, certainly, at that time, she did hit me and I ended up losing consciousness, but I wish you'd stop deciding with just wins or losses, strength or weakness. I wish you didn't say that, just because of that, Aikawa Jun is no longer the Strongest."

"..."

"..."

...

Humanity's Strongest excuse began!

"The 'Strongest' isn't in that sense. I have been thinking about things for a long time over here. Because I'm an adult. I wish you didn't complain about every little trivial thing. It's like pulling the rug from under a multilayered box, really. You get it, don't you? Look, I don't think you can judge who the Strongest is with such a small sample size. If it's just once or twice, it could just be a fluke, so yeah, you need to take into consideration the long piled up experience, the efforts and these kinds of things, right? Well well, it's not like I don't understand your perspective, I even have somewhat thought of a flexible counterplan."

"..."

"..."

I got it...

I got it, so please stop, Aikawa-san...

"Hm. Then try fighting her once more. And protect me like that, my daughter."

"Ugh!"

She was clearly at a loss for words.

Somehow...

I wondered about how ten years ago, when for the fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi, Aikawa-san's existence was just a tool, how did Saitou Takashi use Aikawa-san—but I see, he did it like that.

Of course you'll end up being resented, Mr. Fox...

But... She was totally being handled like a kid.

Last month, in October—was that also the case?

Was it always like this?

Their father daughter reunion—

I still couldn't think of it as a peaceful family reunion.

But, well...even then, Saitou Takashi being Humanity's Worst—doesn't change. Aikawa-san's words "you reap what you sow" were perfectly fitting.

It wasn’t wrong in my case either.

"Hey, hey, hold on, shitty father. If you treat me like an incompetent character, it'll really be the end of the world, you know."

"Isn't it fine? It's the end, after all. Let's all be incompetent."

"No way. I don't want to end like the last chapter of a manga axed for any reason other than *not being popular*."

"Let's do an embarrassing confession contest. First, Humanity's Worst, me. To be honest, I haven't thought of anything."

"That, we know."

"I also know to a disgusting degree."

"Hm. What a silly tale."

The fox-masked man said in a self-mocking way.

"To think—that the world will end in this unrelated place—abruptly. Good grief. Not as a result of our fight—not as a result of the fight with my enemy, nor as a result of my research—just because of one *limb*'s selfish actions, everything will be prevented... But I wanted to see the world's end—the Story's end. No—as Jikoku thought, the current Magokoro—her existence itself might be *the world's end*—No...um. No...not that...not with that analysis—the world... Aah...I see, so that's what it is...if it's that..."

If it is.

I was running after something worthless.

The fox-masked man—said so.

'To think the happiness I was searching for was this close—even jokes can become poison. What are you telling Maeterlinck to do in this day and age."

"..."

The fox-masked man—

Why didn't he think of the same thing as Tokinomiya Jikoku until now? If you think that the Orange Seed is Aikawa Jun's evolved form, then Magokoro herself—Magokoro herself being *the world's end* is a pretty fair possibility, even without being Tokinomiya Jikoku—

No.

It was not that he didn't think about it.

That was—a previous failure.

Since he already failed once ten years ago—he wouldn't repeat anything twice, be it a success or a failure, was it because of that way of thinking? I didn't think the explanation held itself with just that...

But.

"You said it was worthless, didn't you?"

I—

I said, facing the fox-masked man.

"Just now, you called the world's end—worthless."

"...I meant—if Magokoro was it, then it is worthless. Feels like a novel I enjoyed reading ended not half-assedly, but with a worthless punchline."

"If—"

I said.

With conviction.

And—Kunagisa's words.

Remembering Kunagisa's final request.

"If you used this as an occasion to give up on *the world's end*, *the Story's* end—that you called *worthless*, if you are able to abandon it—**I could do something about this case**."

"..."

The fox-masked man—

Narrowed his eyes and dubiously looked back at me.

"'Do something'—what exactly. You are without a doubt resented like me—after all, originally, the one who opened her lock and pushed her to the position of Orange Seed—who pushed Omokage Magokoro, who was as incomplete **as her seniors**—was you, Nonsense User."

"I know."

The responsibility for Magokoro.

The responsibility for the Orange Seed—

Seeing the apartment's miserable state, I realized it.

However, it was not responsibility that I needed.

Responsibility didn't matter.

It wasn't that—

I wanted to move for something much more important.

Move.

"You also heard Rurero's story, right? There's nothing we can do—Magokoro won't stop her rampage—until she dies, until her heart stops."

"I know that. I know, I know, I am probably—the one who knows that the most. Therefore—no, even regardless of causes and effect—"

I said.

"I need to save—Magokoro."

Because she was my friend.

Because that was surely—my last role.

I had still it left undone—

Because it was the only thing I was good enough for.

ACT 20 - ALLY OF JUSTICE
ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI
SPACE CREATOR

0

Neglecting self-consciousness is only deluded attachment.
It is the process of allowing a diminutive to diminish even further.

1

Ichirizuka Konomi-

I had already heard beforehand about Konomi-san's appearance from Izumu-kun—and I was able to confirm it at first glance.

In short, the kind that would read poems in a library—

A serious and upright woman.

That described her perfectly.

Around Shingyokyoku, on Shijo street, in a bookstore about midway in between Kawaramachi street and Karasuma street, reading Cocteau poems in the Shincho bunko corner on the first floor, she fit the image.

Space...Creator.

"Mm. Hello."

Realizing that I was approaching her—obviously, needless to say, she already knew my appearance—Konomi promptly closed her book and put it back in its place.

Then she bowed deeply.

"Nice to meet you. I am the second step of the *Thirteen Stairs*—Ichirizuka Konomi. Pleased to know you from now on."

"...I assume my introduction is unnecessary."

"Yes. I am well aware," Raising her head, she smiled. "I’ve heard many rumors—even before you became Mr. Fox's enemy."

"Is that so—that's...I see."

"I do possess a few old friends at the ER3 System. I also have somewhat of a connection with an affiliate of the Kunagisa Syndicate, Ichigai."

"Heeh—with that Ichigai. Then we might have crossed paths six years ago. Err..."

"Please call me Konomi. Though I am not Humanity's Strongest—I am not too fond of being called by my surname."

Konomi-san stuck out her tongue in a playful manner.

"Because 'Ichirizuka' doesn't really have a good meaning if you read it backwards."

"Then, Konomi-san—that's fine, right?"

Tasteless glasses with black rims.

Hair parted in two.

Chic colors, plain clothes.

How should I put it, amongst the *Thirteen Stairs* and their mostly strong characters, she looked like someone who doesn't stand out much—if we're only talking about exterior components, only Zukin-chan who represented the image of the *high school girl* could beat her—however.

Even then, even after having exchanged so few words with her, I could already feel it, the bizarre sensation her demeanor gave off—she had no visible weaknesses. No matter where you came at her from, she had no spots you could take advantage of. That strange sensation in itself was enough to pressure me.

She wasn't an opponent I could be careless against.

I felt on edge.

However—

She was smiling with no concern.

"Oh please, don't be so wary of me—I'm as scared as you are. We're both deprived of combat abilities. If worse came to worst, you could pin me down with your strength. So I am more scared than you here."

Look, she said as she rolled up her sleeves.

"What can I do with these twigs?"

"...Right."

"Also, we shouldn't be in an adversarial relationship anymore, right? Then I would prefer for both of us to continue this conversation with utmost transparency."

For starters—Konomi-san swiftly pointed at the store's automatic entrance door as if prompting me.

"Let's talk while walking. I might just be fussy but—I don't really like talking in one place."

"Understood."

"Then."

Konomi-san moved to pass by my side—with totally silent footsteps. She had moved. It took me a moment to comprehend that—but I immediately followed after her.

How do I put it—it was natural.

It was too natural.

Too reasonable.

...Our combat potential was probably negligible for both of us...

But even then, I was the weaker one—I thought. Rather than "mine", that was the Nonsense User's thought.

Even if we were both of the non-combatant type, the worlds we lived in were too different. You could say I was just a civilian losing his way in the battlefield—but Konomi-san was probably a civilian who was born on and grew up on battlefields. I think that lack of weaknesses stemmed from that. Of course, the *Space Creator* was probably something transmitted over generations—but that was a more fundamental problem.

However—

Forgetting her appearance for an instant, what Izumu-kun said about her personality—she felt a little different from that. I think he said she had a pretty nasty personality but... Well, that was one and a half months ago, so to be honest, I didn't really remember it clearly. I might have just been remembering wrong.

From what I could see, she was in her mid-twenties—slightly younger than Emoto-san and Rurero-san. While I was thinking about what her exact age was, we came out to the street at Shijo towards the west.

"Still—" Konomi-san started. She seemed very emotive. "—I didn't think there would be a day where I could peacefully walk alongside you like this. It's very mysterious."

"That's...the same for me. I was in your care night and day, from the front and the back, ever since you had me meet Noise on the subway—until just yesterday, when Misora-chan and Takami-chan were on the verge of killing me."

"My, please. I am not too fond of when you talk so sarcastically."

"Want to lock our arms?"

"That would be going too far. Also, my arms are reserved to be locked only with Mr. Fox's."

Though Mr. Fox and I locking arms surely won't ever happen for eternity—Konomi-san added bitterly.

She's not someone you can hate, I thought.

However, on that point—her abnormality, her *Space Creation* made that a more complex issue.

"..."

The 2nd of November.

Wednesday afternoon, 4 o'clock.

I had a meeting with Ichirizuka Konomi.

After that—

After hearing Rurero-san's story.

I'd said some grandiose things to the fox-masked man—however, realistically speaking, the truth was that, at this point in time, there was nothing I could do anything about.

And talking about reality—

Like Zerozaki, I had pulled an all-nighter, and until then I was tensed up—but when Emoto-san examined all of us individually after

accompanying Rurero-san to her room on the second floor, she ordered me to take medical rest.

"Please go to sleep."

She said.

"Ikkun probably...hasn't slept much. And on top of that, a few...a few things happened, so your mind must be confused and panicked."

"..."

I wondered if there was no other way to put it.

Setting aside whether I was sleepy or not—it was true that my body was demanding some rest. I had been at my limit for some time.

Normally—

Normally, it wouldn't have been unnatural for me to collapse after parting with Kunagisa. Why that didn't happen was simply because—Kunagisa had released me, also more importantly because of Magokoro's situation.

"Hm."

The fox masked man said.

"My enemy. Just in case, to answer your nonsense from now—sadly, this isn't a demand we can establish a deal on."

"..."

"No, it's not like I'm doubting your capability to stop Magokoro—rather, I think you are the only one capable of that, currently. Only you, the scabbard to that sword. Although the probability is quite low—there is a chance. But, my enemy."

The fox-masked man—put his mask back on.

"Even if you managed to stop Magokoro, I would probably soon begin yearning for the next *end of the world*. Using this outdated model."

The fox masked man pointed at Aikawa-san.

Don't go around calling people outdated, Aikawa-san answered with irritation. Well, of course she would.

"One of my principles is to keep promises as much as I can—but that also means I don't take on promises I can't keep. As long as I'm alive, I cannot give up on the world's end, the Story's end."

"...I bet."

It was—an unreasonable deal.

As I thought—

I couldn't make this fox-masked man—Humanity's Worst, Saitou Takashi, give up on the world's end as long as he was still alive.

If possible, I was aiming for two birds with one stone.

"Is that so..."

"Sorry. So—what to do, my enemy?"

"...Anyway—for now, let's just sleep. Although I said some grandiose things, it's not like I have a concrete plan—"

Right, the fox-masked agreed.

Looking at me and Aikawa-sana alternatively.

"In any case—for starters, the best plan for now is to gather at a single place. Hm. The Saitou Clinic, huh—I thought of it as a finished place, however—in the end, I had no other choices but to return here. That's quite an unpleasant story. Oops...right, I must also gather the remaining *Thirteen Stairs*-"

"...Then, excuse me."

The fox-masked man—

He probably didn't know of Zukin-chan's death yet.

Neither of the circumstances surrounding Utage Kudan—Shigai Touno.

But I didn't feel like informing him.

It's not like I strongly wanted to go to sleep—

But I decided to do as Emoto-san suggested.

The first of November—

The second floor was already full, so I went to the room Kuchiha-chan probably used—and decided to take a nap there.

If I remember correctly, in August, Kuchiha-chan wouldn't let me in under any circumstances. Of course, I hadn't expected I would enter Kuchiha's room under those circumstances, but—well, as expected, Emoto-san had cleaned out the entire place, so there wasn't even a shadow of Kuchiha-chan's presence left-

When I woke up, it was midnight.

I had some bad sleep—and woke up.

Even though I should've had plenty of sleep...it didn't feel sufficient.

We were in November, so even in Kyoto, the morning should have been cold...

Then why,

Why was I sleeping so badly...

I felt like I had a bad dream.

It was as usual.

I unsteadily exited the room—

The building was all dark.

Of course, we were in the middle of the night.

Everyone should've been asleep.

Aikawa-san, the fox-masked man, and Emoto-san.

And needless to say, Rurero-san.

When I was thinking that, I saw some light leaking from the gap between the waiting room doors. Thinking "Aah, I see," I approached the room, opened the sliding door and there, as I thought, was Zerozaki Hitoshiki—drinking tea in a relaxed manner.

Tea he'd probably brewed himself.

"Yo, Ii-tan."

"Ya, Zerorin."

Since Zerozaki has been sleeping since midday he probably woke up in the night. Then, well, not having anything special to do, he seemed bored.

I brought a cushion to the side facing Zerozaki with the table between us, and sat cross-legged on it.

"For someone who just slept 10 hours, you look awfully unrefreshed, don't you?"

"That's because the dakimakura I'm used to isn't here...so my sleep was slightly shallow. Well, even then, I wasn't not sleepy."

"...If you're starving, want me to cook you something?"

"Your always hungry character will catch on if you're not careful... No thanks. I don't really feel hungry."

"That said, you haven't eaten anything in a whole day, right?"

"I'm used to fasting. I can function on just water for three days. I'm talking from experience, you see."

"Hahn. Is that from your ER3 days?"

"Yeah—that reminds me, you went abroad. That means you were around there, right? I just thought I hadn't confirmed it yet."

"Yeah, kinda. Well, I don't really want to talk about that though. You see, Hitoshiki-kun kinda went through some pathetic experiences over there."

"Then don't say it. I won't ask," I said. "But, my bad. Making you come back expressly. I hesitated but in the end I decided to apologize for that."

"Don't sweat it. Even if you hadn't called me, even if that denim braid woman hadn't come—I'm sure we would have met here. If that Omokage Magokoro girl really did annihilate the Zerozaki Clan."

"...Are you thinking about revenge?"

I think—

Magokoro didn't even remember that.

Because that must have happened while she was nearly perfectly under the control of Kino-san, Rurero-san and Tokinomiya Jikoku's chains—

Even then.

If she did kill his family—then the intention of the perpetrator might not matter.

But, Zerozaki said,

"I'm not.

"It's as I said to that fox—I didn't really think of them as family. From my perspective, they were just **people around nearby**. I was constantly running away. The chairman from middle school really left an impression on me. There was just one guy annoyingly chasing after me, though—but he's no longer around. I really only took the Zerozaki name, as I said, simply because I liked it..."

"..."

Even then—

We would have met here, huh.

"I won't ever be able to understand you," is what I thought of saying. However, if I opened my mouth, what would've probably come out was "As expected of my reverse side,"—so I didn't say anything.

Zerozaki,

"Kahahah."

Laughed.

"I heard from that perverted woman when we passed each other."

"...? Aah, Emoto-san. What'd you hear?"

"That Omokage Magokoro—The Orange Seed is rampaging. And that was the cause of that wreck."

"—Zerozaki. What do you think I should do?"

"Whatever you want. That story is already outside of what I can influence—it's the same as in May. Looks like I can't partake in your stories."

"Yes, looks like it."

"And I'm completely late—if the situation was still in the middle of that war with that fox jerk, I probably could have been of use to you. But when it comes to your friends, to your human relationships, it's impossible."

"..."

"If those Miotsukushi twins come to assault you again, I don't mind protecting you, but outside of that, it's your job."

"I see... You're right," I agreed. "If possible, I would have liked to leave the Thought Manipulator, Tokinomiya Jikoku, in your care too, though."

"I'm not too fond of that kind of twisted stuff. My way of doing things is more akin to finishing the job before you're able to get cursed. But—well, let me see. I guess I can give you at least one counterplan. That level of interference shouldn't be a bother, probably," Zerozaki said. "According to the woman that told me about Jikoku Tokinomiya—'*If you were to make him into your enemy*'."

"If I were to?"

"'*Don't see anything.*'"

"What?"

"Don't see anything, she said. I don't get it either. Wordplay is more of your genre, right? Write it down or whatever you please."

"..."

"It was just that."

It was just that.

After that, we held normal, worthless conversations for the rest of the night, until the morning came and everyone woke up.

On my side, I talked about a few things that had happened this year.

Seeing that Zerozaki said a few times "I might know that person," it really looked like there was a mysterious connection between Zerozaki and me.

I heard stories about the Zerozaki *family*.

The Zerozaki Clan.

The story about Zerozaki's big brother—and little sister.

Then, I heard about the time when Zerozaki went on as a normal middle school student. It seemed he used the name *Migiwame Toshiki,* the one which fox-masked man brought up.

Also, his meeting with Izumu-kun—

That took place some time near his graduation from middle school.

"We've both led worthless lives, huh."

"Yeah, totally."

Zerozaki laughed—I didn't.

Then—

While everyone, including Rurero-san, was eating the breakfast prepared by Emoto-san and Aikawa-san (looking at them from behind during the cooking, it was a bizarre scene)—

Rurero-san's phone rang.

It was a call from Konomi-san—the first thing was confirming whether they were able to bring the fox-masked into safety, then what she said was—

I captured Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Apparently.

So—

End of flashback, that's how we got here...

"...Not really, I don't have a hobby of pointlessly praising others, so understand that this is just me stating my impression—Konomi-san. Honestly, among the *Thirteen Stairs*, you look like the most capable one. Among that group of weirdos, it's like you're the only one with the right to be a leader."

"I am terribly grateful for your praise, but you think too highly of me. I am not too fond of being overestimated."

"Thinking back on it, apparently Izumu-kun didn't have the best impression of you—but now I think I get why."

"That went for both of us. After all, Izumu-san's head isn't really logic-minded. Or should I say he takes things too simply? And for you, who sealed Izumu-san—and Rizumu-san with words, forgetting the enemy/ally relations, I am quite impressed. Though, of course, keep that between us."

"Isn't that just flattery, though?"

"Not at all. This is not flattery. If I had to say, this is a kind of narcissism. Because my *Space Creation* and your *Nonsense* were basically founded with the same mechanisms. In that sense, I have real sympathy for you—well, needless to say, hatred of the same breed too though."

"...Is that why you used Misora-chan and Takami-chan to try and kill me? Because of hatred of the same breed, of resentment?"

"If I had a reason to kill you, rather than hatred, it would most likely be because our characters overlap."

"..."

As if I'm gonna get killed for a reason like that.

So absurd.

"But it's not like that really was the reason, Nonsense User-san. Please do not get the wrong idea. That was merely the request of Miotsukushi's Misora-san and Takami-san. I did nothing more than support them."

"I don't really understand the circumstances yet. ...Actually, I was thinking that I should at least ask you about this, to clarify this point before meeting Tokinomiya Jikoku—in the end, that day, what did you do? I can't seem to visualize the timeline. I can't feel right without being able to read the timetable."

"...After Mr. Fox surrendered to you and the war ended—I was mainly in charge of managing the losses. Since Mr. Fox is who he is, he isn't suited towards that kind of job."

"Yeah, obviously."

It also didn't look like he was suited for any other kind of job.

Well, that should be a valid alibi.

...But, Konomi-san was frank about the fox-masked man. That aspect differed from the Miotsukushi Sisters—didn’t it?

Ichirizuka Konomi.

"Of course, Mr. Fox persuading each and everyone personally would have been more sincere, but—separately from that, I did a slight internal investigation on the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"No, even if you can say that the current *Thirteen Stairs* have their own objectives, at their core, they were resources gathered for the purpose of defeating *Ii-chan*—with the war with you being over, I thought I had to reorder the *space* around there. Basically, that was just Ichirizuka Konomi's personal preference of disliking gaps in spaces. The *Thirteen Stairs* having drifted from its original purpose, let's just say I cleaned some parts that were accepted until now."

"...Because of that task, Tokinomiya Jikoku's twistedness became apparent?"

"That's the gist of it. I somehow managed to corner him with questions, but he ran away. When I looked further into the matter—things cleared up. ...But that happened last month anyway, so it was already too late."

That didn't count much as having taken the upper hand, Konomi added.

Even though that must have been quite a feat, she was humble.

"Hmm..."

During the second half of October, I spent my days being wary of my surroundings, but with nothing happening, you could say I was living carefreely. To think that such a battle was happening during that period.

I had no words.

"I had some suspicions beforehand about Jikoku-san. When I notified him of Mr. Fox's surrender, he gave me a strange response, not totally being convinced."

I peeped into it a little, she said.

"Albeit both being *Cursing Names*, Jikoku-san was slightly different from Raichi-san—actually, you could say that Raichi-san was too virtuous for a *Cursing Name*, for a *Kino*."

"That—might be true."

Although Kino-san released a *disease* on Miiko-san—he should have had more virulent *diseases* laying around, had he wished to use them. Of course, that's only in hindsight...Izumu-kun felt more threatened by the name *Kino*

than *Tokinomiya*, but that was without taking his personality into account—no, if I had to comment from my position, Jikoku-san and Kino-san were basically the same deal.

Hmm...

"...But I don't think that explanation justifies that incident in the Imperial Garden, though. Why on earth did I have to be assaulted by you three?"

"After contacting Migishita-san, I had to chase after the escaped Jikoku-san independently. But even I wasn't so full of myself as to think I could measure against a *Cursing Name* alone. I need assistance from other people."

"And they were Misora-chan and Takami-chan?"

Yes, she acquiesced.

"Misora-san and Takami-san were next on the list of targets I had to monitor—there was that, but also that they deeply despise you since the incident with Izumu-kun at the Sumiyuri Academy. It also seemed like Mr. Fox's sincerity didn't quite get through to them."

"They were fanatical, right?"

"Yes. More fanatical than loyal. As expected of the Nonsense User-san, he manages to find fitting words. Even then, until then, I did my best to not let them lay a hand on you."

"...Thank you very much, though I don't think this a situation where I should express my gratitude—"

"Right. In order to have Misora-san and Takami-san *cooperate* with me on Jikoku-san's capture—I ultimately had to use you."

In this person's case—

She was neither loyal nor fanatical, I guess.

I don't know if it could be applied here, but...

One would find the word "resourceful".

Very fitting for her.

"When I asked for assistance from Misora-san and Takami-san—they were in the midst of torturing Furuyari-san. Ah, as you are aware, I'm talking about the twelfth one."

"..."

"About Furuyari-san's *betrayal*... About her having a secret entente with you, honestly, it was evident to me and not something worth especially monitoring—even for Mr. Fox, it was the same. Rather, Mr. Fox had a plan relying on that aspect of the twelfth generation Furuyari Zukin—but there were about two idiots unable to comprehend that."

"Well...for you professionals, her betrayal was completely and thoroughly seen through."

"To be frank, it hurts my feelings," Konomi-san said. "With the war against you already over...there was no reason to go so far over such a normal girl. I am not too fond of that."

"..."

Even—if those were her real thoughts.

Those words failed to convince me.

Konomi-san continued.

"At that time, my attention was too focused on Jikoku-san—my direct monitoring of the Miotsukushi Sisters was simply lacking. And the twelfth Furuyari-san wasn't even on my watch... Also, Misora-san and Takami-san extracted a capital piece of information from Furuyari-san."

"Her meeting with me at the Imperial Garden—right."

On the thirty-first of October—9AM.

At the Imperial Garden—handing her the Unsigned.

"Unlike you, persuading people with words isn't my specialty—therefore I requested the Miotsukushi Sisters to help me find Jikoku-san in exchange for helping them with that. Using Mr. Fox's name at times, of course."

"...Finally, I can comprehend now."

Now—

Every statement from Misora-chan and Takami-chan on that day made sense. The reason why, even though they were straying from Mr. Fox's orders, Konomi-san, who was the most trusted by him, was cooperating with them—

"You could say I was responsible for instigating their vigilance towards you—but at that point, I couldn't expect the Story to take such a turn."

"..."

Then, as I thought, Konomi-san didn't mind if I was killed by the Miotsukushi Sisters in that garden...

I felt like I finally reached that "nasty personality" Izumu-kun was talking about.

Saying she didn't choose the means to accomplish her goals, that she always chose the shortest route, might sound good, but...

Her character might have been overlapping with mine.

"My, please. Don't get the wrong idea—ever since Mr. Fox said 'Don't get involved with my enemy any longer,' I took measures to at least keep you from dying. In reality, I was the one to contact Utage-san."

"...Heeh."

Having *created a space* inside the Imperial Garden, she also did whatever possible to keep me from going there. She only didn't make it in time—because Utage Kudan was Shigai Touno... Aah, I see. Then that became an opportunity for Touno-san—although late, she still informed me about Kunagisa.

From what Zerozaki heard from Touno-san, she knew nothing about the *Space Creator*—Konomi-san, but that would mean Konomi-san used her favorite *Space Creation* to make Touno-san the *Imaginary Weapon* move without her knowing—I guess.

It was all entangled...

Or packed, I should say.

Naturally, from Konomi-san's perspective, even if Touno-san failed to stop me from going to the Imperial Garden, she knew that Magokoro was

inside the apartment—although it was just a coincidence that Zerozaki was the one rescue me—though it was just a coincidence, even if that didn't happen, Magokoro would have been the one to come.

That being said—

That was surely a dangerous bet.

Since that scene was only a few hours before the Thought Manipulation to *release* Magokoro activated—that was a bold way of thinking, like passing a string through a needle, no, even more, like passing a string through a bed of needles. She probably also thought it would be for the best to have Touno-san protect Magokoro before Rurero-san's arrival, but—what was now clear was that, before being Utage Kudan, Touno-san was a member of *Team*. Did Konomi-san know that at that point? If she did know... No, rather, if she didn't know—I guess? Of course, in the worst case scenario, Konomi-san would be satisfied with just ensuring Mr. Fox's safety, so no matter whether Touno-san made it in time or not, no matter what state Magokoro was in, and needless to say, no matter whether I got killed or not, ultimately, she didn't care.

In other words, everything was set up so that, no matter how things rolled out, her first priority would always be achieved.

Umm...

Nasty...

"To Misora-san and Takami-san, I made them swear on Mr. Fox's name that 'There was only one chance. Whether they succeed or not, the next step was searching for Jikoku-san'. Just in case, I cast *Space Creation* on them, so if anyone came to the rescue, I intended to stop them on the spot."

"Then... Just making the alarm bell ring was enough, in this case?"

"Exactly. It's no good, you have to carry out your intention. Having fooled the Niounomiya Siblings, what are you doing being fooled by the Miotsukushi Sisters?"

"Yeah..."

"That being said—that Demonic Killer broke through my *Space Creation* without any trouble—although the effect was dimmer due to the large area it covered... No, that shouldn't matter now. That kind of case exists. If there is a next time, I will do better then," Konomi-san said. "Aah, but be at ease—I have told Misora-san and Takami-san to refrain from attacking you again."

"Thank you for that. That is, if they really do follow your instructions, though... So, what are those two doing now?"

"With Jikoku-san being captured, Ichirizuka Konomi's role is also over. So I told those two to go back to the Saitou Clinic and guard Mr. Fox. I have no proof, but they probably obeyed."

"...You're using the other *Thirteen Stairs*—and even myself like your pawns, Konomi-san. Is that because of your leadership? That reminds me a little of an old acquaintance."

"Do you mean Hagihara Shiogi-san?"

Even though I stayed ambiguous, she hit the bullseye.

It felt like a waste.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I also come from Sumiyuri Academy—although I was expelled in my second year of highschool due to misbehavior."

"Expelled? Heeeh—"

If I remember correctly—

Being expelled from that academy should have been the equivalent of being put on a wanted list. Hime-chan wasn't an exception either...

"When the chairman changed a few years back, I heard the system underwent quite a few changes... But even then, I heard the praise for Hagihara Shiogi-san. Mr. Fox too was fervent about her case. I did have some curiosity myself. After all, I was part of Sumiyuri Academy's strategic section."

Although I didn't reach the position of strategist, Konomi-san added with a smile.

Even if she smiled, I didn't know how to take it.

"Ah, it's here."

Crossing the lights on Karasuma Street, having walked a few dozen meters more—Konomi-san's feet stopped.

There was a building.

A large building able to accomodate a large company office. What Konomi-san pointed at was the sort of brand new building with mirror-like glass walls.

"...Is Tokinomiya Jikoku—confined here?"

"'Confined' makes me sound like a bad person. I am not too fond of that."

"Then, under house arrest?"

"That should be about right. As expected of the Nonsense User."

"Please don't repeat 'as expected' so many times—I am similar to you in the sense that I hate being overestimated."

"Our characters overlap, right?"

"From the conversation we exchanged up to now, I will admit that. You shouldn't say it too openly. Normally, it should be embarrassing to have your character overlap with other people. Setting that aside, however—being under arrest in such a modern building on a big street... Isn't that too unreasonable? You can't know when it might be exposed. And there's a ton of people too."

"On the fourth floor there is a dead space, a room somewhat too narrow for office usage—I used my *Space Creation* there and isolated it. It seems it was originally one of Jikoku-san's hiding spots, but—trying to hide *Space* from me, even if he is a *Tokinomiya* and a *Cursing Name*, that's a prime example of underestimating your opponent."

"Heeh—"

In other words, even if Tokinomiya Jikoku managed to escape from that room—he was restrained there from the outside by Konomi-san and the Miotukushi Sisters. As the person in question said, since her strength was

insufficient alone, she used the Miotsukushi Sisters to the utmost with a technique similar to the famous aiki[3]... Well...although I don't want to admit it, I guess that means if they're used correctly, the Miotsukushi Sisters aren't just a nuisance...

Huh, hey, hold on.

These two returning to the Saitou Clinic meant—they would bump into Zerozaki, no?

That was a bit...I wonder.

Well, Mr. Fox and Aikawa-san were there, so it shouldn't become a big deal...

"Is something the matter?"

"No... Then, we don't have time, so—"

I checked my watch.

30 past 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

It's not like we had a time limit, but—

"For starters, I will do my usual impromptu performance and talk with him."

"Yes. From here on out it's your territory."

Konomi-san said.

"I'm leaving it to you."

[3] A martial arts concept where one redirects their opponent's power and uses it to their advantage.

2

Tokinomiya Jikoku—

That reminded me, no one had yet to tell me anything about his appearance, so I couldn't confirm for sure that it was him—however, inside this room with only the minimum amount of furniture to live, he, squatting on the floor with both hands handcuffed to a giant nail stabbed into the floor, unable to make a single move, was the only human inside this room, so—

I was sure he was Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Even though I said handcuffs, they were not that special.

With only that level of restraint, certainly, the phrase "under arrest" qualified best—but, since he couldn't escape, there was no doubt Jikoku-san had no combat ability, like Konomi-san and me.

You could see traces of torture left on Jikoku-san's body. That was probably the Miotsukushi Sisters' doing. The same kinds of wounds as on Zukin-chan's body. However, Jikoku-san—he didn't seem bothered by them.

No, I was sure torture was meaningless on him.

He probably—

Before even requiring torture, before even being asked, confessed to everything on his own.

In that sense, he didn't have any claims or opinions—

Nothing he should have been protecting.

His eyes were blindfolded with a towel, but—

He immediately noticed when I entered the room,

"Aah."

He said.

"—Hello."

"You are—I see, *Ii-chan*, right? It seems we both already know each other too well for introductions to be necessary, but it should be fine. That is necessary to be courteous. I'm more mindful of rules than anything."

Then, Tokinomiya Jikoku named himself.

"Sixth step of the *Thirteen Stairs*—Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"..."

"That being said, it has probably changed by a few steps by this point—also, no one would recognize me as one of the *Thirteen Stairs* anymore. I cannot help but associate the number *thirteen* with betrayal, but the fact that Judas was neither Utage-kun nor Magokoro-kun—but this very self, is an ironic result."

"Yes...probably."

Emoto-san and Zukin-chan, even Rurero-san—in that sense, weren't traitors. Although they betrayed the fox-masked man in many ways—they didn't rebel in the same way as Jikoku-san.

Even the betrayal was in the contract.

That person—was without a doubt, Judas.

"...I want you to remove my blindfold."

"Eh?"

"I just want to see your face—isn't it fine, just that much?"

"...I'm very sorry, but—I've already been warned by Konomi-san. About the fact that, against an amateur, just by making eye contact—you could use your Thought Manipulation."

"What, she found me out. That's utterly vexing."

Jikoku-san said, without a hint of remorse.

Smiling with loads of leeway.

"That said—if you truly are *Ii-chan*, then techniques like instant hypnosis wouldn't work on you, though—I am weak against people with a strong heart."

"..."

"You probably think your heart isn't strong, but that's wrong—"

"Please stop, Jikoku-san," I said. "It might be different with other methods, but at least when it comes to words, your techniques won't work on me."

"...The Nonsense User, huh."

"Well, that's about right."

I—

Closed the door behind me and leaned back on it. Five meters. Leaving that much of a distance between us—well, that should probably be fine.

There were no worries about anyone bothering us.

Konomi-san should've been casting *Space Creation* from the outside so that no hindrance could enter.

I could face the Thought Manipulator—

As much as I wanted.

"So...Jikoku-san. Now, to what extent do you understand what is happening in the world—the current situation?"

"Unfortunately, it's unfair to ask me that. That's harassment. The Miotsukushi Sisters, Misora-kun and Takami-kun, are lacking in the ability to explain things to people, so I was just beaten up one-sidedly—however, if even then, if even then you say it's fine, then I have a guess. For not just Misora-kun and Takami-kun—not just Konomi-kun, but *Ii-chan* to appear in front of me like this."

"..."

"So Mr. Fox chose to form a common front with you, huh—It's certainly fitting of him. However, from my position, it's disappointing. I thought Mr. Fox would be overjoyed, after all."

"Overjoyed—you say?"

"Didn't I make the *world's end* he wished for a reality? What could he be dissatisfied about?"

"Magokoro's rampage probably isn't the *world's end* that Mr. Fox wished for—for instance, you at least should get that he didn't wish for an *end* where a nuclear weapon would sweep over the earth, right? Magokoro's rampage is surely an extension of that—"

"It's not a rampage. It's a liberation."

Jikoku-san corrected my words with strong emotion in his voice, as if he would never concede on that point.

"...You must be thinking that a group using Thought Manipulation are just a fishy good-for-nothing bunch who can't be trusted, right?"

"I won't deny it."

"Yeah, I won't either. In reality, the people from the place I was born, *Tokinomiya*, all have indecent personalities—even myself, I have no intention of claiming to have an upright personality. I won't. But—even then, it's true that I felt pity for the Orange Seed."

"...Pity."

That was—

I'm sure, something...I thought, too.

On the other side of the sea, in the ER3 System's ER3 Program—saying I didn't feel anything towards Omokage Magokoro, with whom I shared a room—would surely be a lie.

A downright lie.

Although it was vague.

I had pity for her.

Therefore—

I opened—her lock.

...

Then, what?

Did that mean that, at that time, **I'd really done the exact same thing** as Jikoku to Magokoro?

Magokoro dying inside a bright red deflagration—

Inside a red, deep red, crimson, deep crimson deflagration was without a doubt my fault—but did Jikoku-san's actions, at least from what you could criticize, hold no different meaning than mine?

No...

That was evident from the get go.

I understood it in the bottom of my heart.

Therefore—

I had to do something.

I had to—save Magokoro.

Her—Omokage Magokoro.

Who became a replacement for Kunagisa—

By my hands.

"To clear up that misunderstanding from earlier—Mr. Fox and I are currently not putting up a common front—not even an alliance. I have no doubt you are aware that the war between Mr. Fox and I is already over—but now, we simply are fellow targets of Omokage Magokoro, who chose the same hiding spot."

"Heeh... Is that so?"

That's fascinating, Jikoku-san said.

Even while blindfolded and restrained by handcuffs—him having a normal, totally casual demeanor was as expected from that person—he probably didn't see me as a threat in this situation.

No, not exactly...

In the first place, Jikoku-san was someone ruling over fear—ruling over *the mind*.

He was already far from that stage.

He looked down at that state of mind from above.

Fear wasn't something to feel, but to manipulate, huh.

"In reality—when Konomi-san contacted him to inform us of your capture, Mr. Fox was unresponsive to a surprising degree. As if that kind of thing—was worthless and inconsequential."

"Isn't that obvious—after all, I was merely one of the thirteen limbs. One of your two hands would be precious, but if you have thirteen, then one isn't a big deal."

"That's why—this is my selfish action. Because I wanted to talk to you a little."

Getting the fox-masked man—

And Konomi-san's cooperation.

On a completely unrelated note to the deal I brought up to the fox-masked man the day prior—with a totally unrelated motive—I came here.

Only to talk with Tokinomiya Jikoku.

In reality—it was not like I'd planned anything. It was as Konomi-san said, an impromptu performance—rather, as for my feelings, it was closer to a rush job. Emoto-san and Rurero-san both told me "You shouldn't do it." It seems that actively trying to get involved with a *Cursing Name* was that far off the norm.

However—

Somehow, instinctively.

Even if I was not really willing to do it, even if I was reluctant—I felt like I had to talk with Jikoku-san.

About Magokoro.

Zerozaki and Aikawa-san proposed to come with me—and I was grateful for that. However, I wanted those two to solidify the defense, so I firmly excused myself.

If it was just me, it would've been another story, but—

I didn't want Magokoro to kill off Saitou Takashi.

If she did—I think it would be the end.

Not of the world or the Story-

Magokoro would end.

The fox-masked would probably have said she already had ended, but—if there was any possibility otherwise, I wanted to aim for it. That's what I thought then.

For me, having lost my sister,

Having lost Kunagisa-

Now, only Magokoro was left.

"—Saitou Takashi."

Jikoku-san said.

"Ever since he invited me into the *Thirteen Stairs*—I have thought one thing. That no matter how many hands he pulled, no matter how many *limbs* he pulled, he would probably never achieve his objective—that he was a lost child."

"...Lost child?"

"Someone with a poor sense of direction would be more fitting than a lost child. Like a stubborn child, bad at giving up. Originally—ten years ago, when he failed at Overkill Red's creation, he should have given up on everything."

"..."

"Like a wraith. Don't you think so too, *Ii-chan*? He's at a point where any normal person would have already given up—that's why, I felt intuitively, Saitou Takashi is probably worse than anyone else—however, therefore, he will never reach his goal, for all eternity. Nonsense User, as someone manipulating words, someone who manipulates words, you should know that 'eternity' isn't the sort of word that ends in just four syllables, right?"

"Unfortunately my speciality is literally nonsense, you see—I have no idea about true meanings. ...So then, you accepted to go under his lead—even though you understood he would never achieve his goal?"

"In short, yes. ...In what way did Mr. Fox describe me?"

"Among the *Thirteen Stairs*, the only man who truly, simply, with no distraction, wished for the *world's end*—that's what he called you. In other

words—in addition to being a single *limb* from the *Thirteen Stairs*, you might have been his only companion."

"I see."

"I'm sure Mr. Fox should be in shock, being betrayed by you. He's not someone to talk begrudgingly about people—but he doesn't hide his dejection either."

"That's wrong—didn't I tell you? I'm just one of the limbs. There is no way he would get dejected for my sake. Didn't you say so too?"

"I only talked about his reaction when you were captured. Well, though he also looked tranquil when you betrayed him. But—he acted in a dejected way about the results you produced. That is certain. Like 'will it really end with something like that?'"

"I have no way to make a judgement on that. However, if I had to say—it's as you said just earlier. He probably hated it. That I defined the Orange Seed—as the world's end."

"Since he is someone who won't repeat anything twice, be it a success or a failure."

"Not that, not just that. Ten years ago, since he got expelled from causality by the means he used—that should have been the first means he couldn't allow himself to use, no matter what. That's why, part of it was me doing it in his stead—as I thought, he was a let-down. A real let down. If he really was dejected, that is. I thought he would enjoy it, though."

"From your perspective—was Magokoro that pitiable?"

"Rather than pitiable—saying that she invites an emotion of compassion would be the truth. The truth. The same feeling as when gazing at a lion inside a cage—in the first place, even though it's called Thought Manipulation, I have always been better at releasing than dominating. From the roots, my nature was that of choosing the simplest means. That's also why I received the name *Tokinomiya Jikoku* though—"

"..."

"Then, what would happen, I wonder. He himself, Saitou Takashi himself—isn't he already something worthy of being called the *world's end*? Just by appearing, he represents the Story, as a Killer Character. Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative and Dying Epilogue—all might have been pointing towards Saitou Takashi. Then, he would really be a wraith."

"...The word wraith is too fitting, right? After all, he was killed by his real daughter ten years ago."

"That daughter, too, should have originally died ten years ago."

"Right."

"Nonsense User. Have you ever died?"

"Who knows... For what it's worth, I think I'm still alive—and I recently decided I would also live in the future—I wonder. Maybe I died a long time ago. Like six years ago, for example."

"If that's the case, you are a wraith. ...The remaining life of anyone who's already died once—it's nothing but a fight against their own self. They can no longer interfere with the world. They have been severed from causality. Therefore, Mr. Fox's way of thinking—it was wrong on a fundamental point."

"...And?"

"Therefore, I belonged to the *Thirteen Stairs*—and my wish was, as Mr. Fox said, the *end of the world*. However, a beautiful word such as 'companion' doesn't fit me. I only used Mr. Fox—and the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*."

The fox-masked man said that too. That, as much as Tokinomiya Jikoku was Saitou Takashi's limb, Saitou Takashi was also Tokinomiya Jikoku's limb.

Of course, had the fox-masked man won the match against me—and achieved the end of the world, that in itself would have been consummate for Jikoku-san.

"Is that so... Honestly, even when I shove it right in his face, does the Orange Seed differ that much from the *end of the world* for Mr. Fox...? Does

he hate it that much? It's a mystery. Well—however, regardless of whether Mr. Fox agrees or disagrees—the end is already the end. I'm sure the released Orange Seed—the Orange Seed released from oppression will kill you all."

"..."

"Without destroying you all her self wouldn't get established. Even the Orange Seed herself is a wraith."

Wraith.

That I—killed.

That Saitou Takashi birthed, that the ER3 raised, and that I killed.

"...I will get straight to the point."

I said to Jikoku-san.

"The Thought Manipulation of *release* you put on Magokoro—is there any way to dispel it?"

"None."

Without a moment's hesitation—he affirmed it instantly.

Without leaving an ounce of ambiguity.

"Even for myself—no, even if you brought the most skilled *Tokinomiya*—removing the Thought Manipulation cast on the Orange Seed is impossible. I didn't cast Thought Manipulation with such a half-hearted will."

"..."

"Even if my own body were to be shredded. I tried to make the *end of the world* a reality by my own means—that's what I resolved myself to do. Therefore, in order to not let my will waver, I reinforced the strength to a level where the *technique* wouldn't ever be loosened. I constructed it meticulously, like a spider's nest, then cast it. There's no way to remove it, nor any way to destroy it either."

"...Is that so..."

To be honest—that's pretty much what I expected.

I thought that, even though it was something that would go on forever as long as her heart was working, that even though it was a spell constantly being cast—that even then, the person having done it might have known a way to dispel it—but I guess it wouldn't be a soft turn of events like that time I asked for a way to dispel the three chains, huh.

It wouldn't all go conveniently, huh.

Utterly regrettable.

"Then—what should I do?"

"Um?"

Jikoku-san showed a puzzled expression.

Without caring, I doubled down on my question.

"How exactly should I—save Magokoro?"

"..."

"I don't care about the end of the world or the end of the Story anymore. In these last three months—ever since I met Mr. Fox, I have been thinking about it somewhere in my heart—I have been thinking about it, but... No answer came forth. But even then, only one thing got cleared up—that kind of problem was outside of my realm."

"I know very well that saying to run away is the Nonsense User's run-of-the-mill trick."

"It's not that—it's just, it seems like fruitless efforts. The attempts to end the world—I can only hear your and Mr. Fox's words as wasted efforts. I mean—"

I said.

"The world, it just doesn't end, does it?"

"...Doesn't end."

"No matter how you think about it, it doesn't end—this world that didn't end, not even after the 4000 year war named 'killing each other continuously', it's not going to end with just a brawl of ten or twelve people.

Even if humanity perishes, the Earth remains. Even if the Earth splits into pieces, space remains. Even if space disappears, time continues. In the end, all you can end is just each and everyone's individual worlds, right? I don't remember exactly when, but Mr. Fox presented an idea that denied people's individual worlds—but they do exist. Your very own world."

Then—

I said while recalling various memories.

"Until now, I have asked various people—'In your view, what is the end of the world?', but...their answers were beautifully all over the place. There are as many ends as there are worlds. If that's not a question where there are correct and incorrect answers—wouldn't that mean that there are an infinite amount of worlds? What Mr. Fox is trying to end—and what you are trying to end is just a fragment—your own personal world, isn't it?"

"...How unpleasant."

Jikoku-san—

For the first time, replied to me without any leeway in his voice.

"Of all things, do you intend to treat Mr. Fox and me—as the frogs in the well?"

"Had you remained in place inside the well, you would have been harmless—but since you went to the ocean and still say the same thing, I'm saying you're a bother. At the very least, for me."

Kunagisa Tomo.

Omokage Magokoro.

And perhaps Aikawa Jun—

"The kind of end that can be brought about by trying to control a single, tiny existence—it can't be a big deal, I think."

"...Treating The Orange Seed and Overkill Red as tiny existences, huh? There's a limit to how preposterous you can get. How preposterous, really. You really don't know your place."

"That's fine by me. ...I will ask again, Jikoku-san. What should I do in order to save Magokoro? If you can think of anything—please tell me."

"I don't know. The only possible answer I can give is that there's no such way. Because, in reality, there isn't.

"...Is that so?"

I distanced my back from the door.

Loosened the arms I had crossed.

The palms of my hands—they were drenched in tense sweat.

My mouth was parched.

"Then—we're done here. It was only for a few minutes, but I'm glad I was able to talk to you. Thank you very much."

"Um?"

"Because I feel like I grasped a hint."

I quietly walked up to Jikoku-san. As expected of someone from the underworld, he slightly raised his body, having felt my presence. Although since he was restrained by the handcuffs, that had almost no meaning to it.

I stopped my feet one step before Jikoku-san, extended my hand, and removed the cloth blinding him.

Jikoku-san's eyes lit up.

The first light he'd seen in a while—

Jikoku-san blinked because of the brightness.

Still holding the cloth in my hands, I fixed Jikoku-san's head—and forcefully made our eyes align.

Made our eyes—align.

"...!"

"I'm not like you all—it doesn't matter how much I struggle, it doesn't matter how I wish for it—I cannot end the world. I'm a man who couldn't even properly kill one person, who couldn't even properly break one person. Therefore, killing the world, breaking the world, and furthermore, ending the world—isn't possible.

"But, I can save the world.

“I decided—I will become an ally of justice."

"...You—my...technique."

"**You were the one who said it wouldn't work, weren't you?**"

"...!"

"**Something like your lowly technique is nothing to me**."

Live the rest of your life—

In fear of me.

"**You are very weak**."

I took my hands off Jikoku-san's head.

Then, I showed him my back.

Opened the door,

And exited—that room.

Of course, there weren't any parting words.

I sighed.

As I thought—as everyone said, a large part of me still thinks I shouldn't have come here—however, as I said earlier, the feeling of having grasped a hint—it was certain.

Magokoro.

The Thought Manipulation cast on Magokoro.

"Thank you for the work."

Having gone out of the building—

I was welcomed by Konomi-san, who had waited there.

"How did it go?"

"I don’t have enough results to be worthy of a report. ...From here on, what will happen to Jikoku-san?"

"What?"

"Rather than 'what will happen'—'what will you do' might be the better question."

"Aah. Be at ease about that point," Konomi-san said. "We have been enemies until just recently, so it's no wonder for you to feel worried, but—

at the very least, I don't have such violent thoughts. I will not insist on making Jikoku-san pay for having betrayed us. I am not too fond of that."

"..."

"That said, the fanatical Miotsukushi Sisters probably want to kill him—I will do my best to avoid that swiftly. If you'd be willing to, could I ask you to teach me your nonsense for that purpose?"

"It's impossible for me to entice those sisters—I've already failed once, so I don't have any motivation left. If you really insist, I will do it though."

"It's not like we have any choice after all. Once we go back to the clinic, they will be there—although, as Mr. Fox said, for me, enticing you would be even more difficult."

"I am grateful for your praise. A part of me thinks that, if you were there, you would have had no need for Noise-kun, but...winning over your heart might take a hundred years."

"If you try to win me over that fervently, even I will concede, though."

Konomi-san said as a joke, and laughed.

"Setting that aside—well, let me see. About how to deal with Jikoku-san next—naturally, we'll make him leave the *Thirteen Stairs, but*...umm, after having gotten every piece of information we can out of him, we will make him unable to use his Thought Manipulation ever again, then free him, I guess. If we go by the book."

"Aah, if it's about that there's no need to worry—he will probably already be unable to use it."

"What?"

"Eyes that can't see anything, the surface of the eyeballs is merely something like a mirror, so—ah, no, nothing."

"...?"

Konomi-san curiously tilted her head.

Immediately straightened herself,

"What are you going to do now?"

And asked me that.

Good adaptability.

"Ah, err, let me see. If you're fine with it, Konomi-san, how about going for a meal together?"

"I didn't mean it that way."

I was swiftly dodged.

Actually, I was flat out rejected.

It was a shock.

"We probably won't be able to remove the Thought Manipulation cast on Magokoro-san. I think that was already brought to light, though."

"...What. So you already knew?"

"No, but I could at least predict that. After all, Jikoku-san has been an acquaintance of mine since before joining the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"Heeh..."

"If he were simply to cause harm to Mr. Fox, I would have quickly eliminated him—but his ideals were closer to Mr. Fox's than mine—"

"You...really love Mr. Fox, huh."

"My, please. How embarrassing."

Konomi-san smiled shily.

Izumu-kun used the word "admiration", but—

This should be called love.

Neither loyalty nor fanaticism.

That's how I thought.

I see, so among the *Thirteen Stairs*, where the seats are hard to replace or fill—I felt like I understood why she had been able to constantly remain the *second step*.

Love.

More than fanaticism—even more irredeemable.

"...About the plans for the future..."

"Ah, yes. What to do, I wonder. If you want to return to the Saitou Clinic, I would like to accompany you, but—"

"Aah, about that. I intend to do that for starters, but...please, Konomi-san. Could you find Magokoro?"

"...Find? Magokoro-san?"

"Yes. I want...to talk to her."

"..."

Konomi-san fell silent for a moment.

Her hand on her chin, she made a thinking face.

"...I don't think it will have any meaning, though."

"I don't think you'll have much difficulty finding her—there's no way you can't spot that flashy orange hair since you were able to capture Jikoku-san the Thought Manipulator without much difficulty."

"However—then, you don't really have to request that of me...I would have had no choice for Mr. Fox's sake—"

"**In secret, without telling Mr. Fox**, please."

"..."

I thought she might have gotten angry—but instead, her face turned bewildered. As if she couldn't comprehend what I said.

I added an explanation.

"Please don't misunderstand—you can still do it for Mr. Fox's sake. I want you to keep it a secret from Mr. Fox—move sneakily. Then, I want you to help me meet Magokoro."

"...But, again—what's the purpose?"

"I want to talk to Magokoro. Somewhere without any hindrance—that's all."

"You will get killed."

Konomi-san replied without mercy.

"You should already know that, don't you?"

"No—now, having talked to Jikoku-san—I noticed a slight feeling of discrepancy. That said, if you asked 'What about it?' it would be the end of that. It's really just a slight discomfort, but—"

"Let's hear it."

Konomi-san didn't say anything unnecessary, and replied on the spot.

Quite the quick decision making ability.

"If Magokoro—wasn't *on a rampage*, but *released*—I think there's something that cannot be explained. For instance, about the apartment being completely destroyed—what meaning do you think that had?"

"Meaning? Meaning, you say?"

"It's half-assed—the destruction is too minute to be completely left up to anger. Also—the question of why **only the apartment's premise** was destroyed contradicts that. How would Konomi-san explain that point?"

"...Umm."

"A lot happened, so I wasn't able to go visit them, but—having only phoned an acquaintance nurse, the wounds everyone there had weren't anything serious. The damage is too small for it to be a *release*, that's a bottleneck. Well, yesterday, it was pretty sudden so my head wasn't working very well, but—even though there are only a few people able to make one whole building collapse—isn't Magokoro somewhat not up to the task? If Magokoro were truly released—it wouldn't have been weird for a whole neighbourhood to be erased."

"...If I remember correctly, I heard a story about an entire town being gone after a certain *Zerozaki* awoke, so—if you take that into account, yes, it certainly might be strange."

Hmm, Konomi-san said.

"However, that's still too weak to be called proof. It's far from well-built reasoning."

"Yes, for now it's just one bit of foreshadowing. It can't be called proof. But, I wonder whether that holds true in the next fact—**the fact that I am alive as we speak**."

"...Ah, yeah."

"Since Magokoro beat up Izumu-kun and Aikawa-san, you might think she specializes in physical force, but in reality, she is also pretty smart—to the point of not bringing any shame to the name of Humanity's Last. That's

why, finding the position of the Saitou Clinic—it should be a trifling matter."

Even then—

Although more than 40 hours have passed since Magokoro's *release*, I'm still—alive.

And probably—Saitou Takashi too.

If she really intended to kill me or Saitou Takashi, Magokoro would have achieved that long ago. For Magokoro—that's as hard as passing an object from her right hand to her left.

"What could it mean...? That's—certainly...weird... You could call it abnormal."

"When you're on the side of the hunted, you don't often think of that, but—considering the hunter's side, Magokoro has no reason to be careful of us. What do you think about that, Konomi-san?"

"...For example—maybe she first aimed for the ER3 System's MS-2... No, that line of thinking would be too self-serving. Killing the closest ones first would be more logical, after all. If she were to put an order on her targets, it should be you, Mr. Fox, then the ER3 System. That would mean—errr, what could it mean...? ...From the start...she didn't intend to kill Mr. Fox or you...?"

She had no intention to kill.

The Orange Seed.

"Or."

I nodded.

It was probably true that an unbreakable technique was cast.

And that it was a release rather than a rampage.

But—

Even then, there still were some unclear points.

That was certain.

There was still—some ambiguity left.

"At the very least, for her actions—it's not yet necessary to say they don't make sense."

"That's probably—a thought Mr. Fox would not have."

"Is that so? Setting yesterday aside, I think he will notice soon. Though I didn't think of it until I talked to Jikoku-san—but, if it's Mr. Fox—"

"No, it's surely impossible."

Konomi-san said flatly.

"You're really ruthless..."

"No. It's not in that sense. That kind of thought... Without a clear, unclouded trust in Magokoro-san—it cannot be attained."

"..."

"Understood," Konomi-san said. "I shall accept your idea. In secrecy of Mr. Fox I shall begin the search for Magokoro-san. That said, Mr. Fox will probably notice it quickly, but—I will do my best for your contact with Magokoro-san to go flawlessly. I shall set up a date for you two."

"I rely on you, Space Creator-san."

"Please call me Konomi. To be honest, I am not too fond of that title—don't you think a title only composed of kanji, without any hiragana, feels too formal?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"So, what to do now?"

"Then, how about a meal together?"

Our date, all alone.

Our lonely date.

At that point—

In my heart.

I had made a resolution.

Somewhere deep inside my heart.

ACT 21 – HOME

ORANGE SEED

OMOKAGE MAGOKORO

0

They're no longer here.

1

The Thirteen Stairs.

Second - Kajou Akira.
Space Creator - Ichirizuka Konomi.
Doctor - Emoto Sonoki.
Imaginary Weapon - Utage Kudan.
Blacksmith - Furuyari Zukin.
Thought Manipulator - Tokinomiya Jikoku.
Puppeteer - Migishita Rurero.
Assassin - Yamiguchi Nureginu.
Professional Killer - Miotsukushi Misora.
Professional Killer - Miotsukushi Takami.
Dissonance - Noise.
Poison User - Kino Raichi.
The Orange Seed - Omokage Magokoro.

Thirteen henchmen.
Thirteen limbs.
Thirteen puppets.
Thirteen heretics.

At first, I'd been worried I wouldn't be able to handle them, that number which seemed so large—but after a mere month and a half, it had been

reduced to an amount that almost couldn't pass as an organization anymore.

Withering the roots, breaking the branches.

Plucking the legs, crushing the head.

Kajou Akira didn't wasn’t present in the first place—he was only living inside Saitou Takashi's heart.

Utage Kudan—Shigai Touno was more loyal to Kunagisa Tomo than to the fox-masked man from the start, and now that Kunagisa had parted ways with me—now that I parted with Kunagisa, there was no meaning to her obeying to the fox-masked man.

Furuyari Zukin, both the eleventh and the twelfth—deceased.

Death from old age and death from torture.

Tokinomiya Jikoku—dropped out.

Yamiguchi Nureginu—retreated.

Noise—dropped out.

Kino Raichi—deceased.

Omokage Magokoro—from the start, she wasn't one of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Up to now, eight of the steps had already disappeared—

The third step, Emoto Sonoki, already lost her will to *end the world*, and the seventh step Migishita Rurero didn't quite drop out, but still required time before being able to return to the frontlines.

That means, the remaining ones were—

Ichirizuka Konomi and the Miotsukushi Sisters.

Thirteen Stairs—subtracting ten steps, three left.

With just three steps, it couldn't really be called a staircase anymore.

That's just a bump.

At most, a stepladder.

Only Konomi-san could be said to be a pain, but—in the current state, even if the war with Mr. Fox resumed, I was confident I would win. In that

sense, Konomi-san was certainly different from Noise-kun. I also knew that Zerozaki alone could handle the Miotsukushi Sisters—

That means the *Thirteen Stairs* were already as good as gone.

As good as erased.

That said, if there remained any problem, it would be Aikawa-san.

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor—Overkill Red.

Death Colored Crimson.

If I didn't clear up why she was still near the fox-masked man—I wouldn't be able to firmly assert the situation and prepare for it.

I didn't really mind it.

If they reconciled, it would be fine.

Asking them how they'd spent the second half of October together would've been too boorish—and I think the current situation is better than having a tragedy smeared with blood play out.

But—when was it again, right, in the case when Aikawa-san, Houko-chan, Moeta-kun and I went to Sumiyuri Academy's ruins to find the antidote for Miiko-san.

Moeta-kun asked Aikawa-san.

"Don't you want to meet your father?"

Aikawa-san answered.

She had always been searching for him—in order to kill him for sure this time.

But, I'd already thought about this once, but now it was evident that Aikawa-san wasn't the kind of person who would kill for a personal grudge, for revenge.

In reality...she was a softie.

I could understand that from how she was friendly with someone like me (though I feel like she mostly caused trouble)—other than that, I have a lot of examples I can think of. At the very least, in terms of kindness, I didn't know anyone surpassing her.

Even in the story I heard from Zerozaki—that was the case.

On the night of November first, Zerozaki narrated to me, although reluctantly, how his second meeting with Aikawa-san had gone—that was a story so soft I got embarrassed just by hearing it. I now got why Zerozaki didn't want to talk about it.

Aikawa-san having no mercy against the *Killing Names*, the *Cursing Names*, and all other residents of that world—that was still definitely true. Even Zerozaki nearly got killed at that time, but—

His family.

Another member from the Zerozaki Clan that happened to be there by chance—the one Zerozaki called *her*, that *Zerozaki*—protected Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Seeing that, Aikawa-san apparently stopped attacking.

"**This kind of thing is no good**."

Saying something like that.

That's cheating, that's against the rules, that's cowardly, if you do something like that there's nothing I can do, is there—

She apparently said that, full of irritation.

After that, Aikawa-san made Zerozaki and that other *Zerozaki* swear that they would never kill anyone again—and left.

"What kind of wrong idea did she get about Demonic Killers? Is she stupid"—Zerozaki and that other *Zerozaki* thought that, but—

He was apparently still upholding that promise.

That meant he didn't spare the Miotsukushi Sisters at the Imperial Garden because I told him to, huh.

He used up all his knives—huh.

Well, even if I didn't really trust that story, I'd certainly heard it somewhere. However—soft.

Soft.

Too soft.

Even in the Weekly Shonen Jump, there haven't been stories that soft recently.

Thinking about it more, even when she confronted Izumu-kun, who was partially responsible for Hime-chan's death, she made it end in a draw—even when she crushed the Sumiyuri Academy in June, she didn't allow a single person to die, did she?

Aah, it was something I could have figured out just by thinking.

Why didn't I think about that sooner?

I didn't know about her ten years ago—

But there was no way her present self could kill anyone.

I'm sure there was no lie in those words.

She probably always went with that intent—when searching for Saitou Takashi. I'm sure she'd spent those ten years searching for the fox-masked man, to the point it could have become her identity.

Her father—

With whom ties had originally been cut.

But, even after meeting, he wouldn't be killed by her.

That kind person.

That's why—the doubt Moeta-kun harbored at that time was, in reality, right on the mark. No, setting that time aside, it shouldn't be a huge problem now. It wasn't like the time when we had to worry about the possibility of the fox-masked man, who'd detained the most important character—Aikawa Jun—in his hands, converting her to his side in the war—

Though it wasn't like that.

As I thought in the Imperial Garden, that day.

For Saitou Takashi—there wasn't any other *limb* easier to handle than Aikawa Jun. In the first place, they were *tools* and *limbs* for that purpose—if it went well, Aikawa-san should have been able to reach the end of the world, the end of the story, on her own.

What did he say back then again?

That at that time...causality nearly collapsed? Because he knew that was a mistake—although he knew, it was too late—then, Saitou Takashi died once. It seemed that Jikoku-san had a different interpretation of that, but at the end of my pondering, I concluded that that was the reason why the fox-masked man chose to welcome the end of the world with the Orange Seed's, Omokage Magokoro's *release*. Although that's it, there's still no explanation as to why that *end* was *worthless*...

Anyhow.

The important point was that the objective truth, which was that Aikawa Jun alone could replace the entirety of the *Thirteen Stairs*, didn't really serve my purpose well.

The possibility that Aikawa Jun and Saitou Takashi reconciled—like Moeta-kun, I found that exceedingly dangerous.

"I'm glad that this family, which resented each other for a long time, finally made peace,"—summing it up like a cliche soap opera would be too normal for those characters of this Story.

Outdated.

Saitou Takashi—who called Aikawa-san "outdated".

That's why—

While waiting for Konomi-san's contact, I spent a bizarre life at the Saitou Clinic, Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility—me, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, Emoto Sonoki, Migishita Rurero, Miotsukushi Misora, Miotsukushi Takami, Aikawa Jun, Saitou Takashi—among this bizarre lifestyle, what preoccupied me the most was—Aikawa-san's movements, which I naturally ended up following with my eyes.

Well, that wasn't all of it either.

For instance, since I was still resented as the one who made them lose face, the Miotsukushi Sisters used every possible opportunity to pick a fight with me (both came nagging at me at the same time so it was annoying). And on my side, against these two who were responsible for killing Zukin-chan—after torturing her, I couldn't quite forgive them, so...how should I

say it, it was hard to deal with. As I thought, when they first returned to the clinic while I was in town, they had a quarrel with Zerozaki. I heard it ended up like last time, so it's not like that was the last nail in the coffin, but after that, they suddenly stopped attacking him.

By the way it seems these two didn't lead their daily lives wearing priest robes. Rather, that was like a fighting cloth to psych themselves up. During our cohabitation at the Saitou Clinic, they wore off the shoulder clothes, miniskirts, and other things suitable for modern girls. You could say they were easy on the eye—but they weren't going easy on my life, so I couldn't approach them in a familiar manner. Although they reluctantly came back to ensure no danger befell the fox-masked man, these two, Misora-chan and Takami-chan, they still hadn't properly faced the fox-masked man—

It was complex.

It was entangled and entwined.

I once tried to ask them.

About why they killed Zukin-chan.

Both of them—

These two, seemingly didn't think anything of having killed her. They both tilted their heads, as if I was the only one saying strange things.

What are you saying?

What are you saying?

I don't get it.

I don't get it.

I don't get it, so I'll kill you.

I don't get it, so I'll kill you.

Even if I get it, I'll kill you.

Even if I get it, I'll kill you.

Aah...

Right.

We lived in different worlds—they were residents of an alternate world.

They carried different circumstances.

They carried different common sense.

Even before talking about fanaticism, before talking about the fox-masked man's sake, Misora-chan and Takami-chan both—they didn't think anything of attacking someone else's life. They killed with the same logic as writing a sentence or using a calculator—professional killers.

Even killing me—it was nothing to them.

Even at the Imperial Garden.

Even now.

They didn't even think of it as violence.

They had totally different circumstances than Izumu-kun—

Than the Izumu-kun from when Rizumu-chan was still around.

That said, the reliable guy protecting me from Misora-chan and Takami-chan, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, managed to always cut down the discord between the Miotsukushi Sisters and me before it ever developed any further.

So, about Zerozaki, he was bad at dealing with Emoto-san. "That woman's ultra scary!" was what came out of Zerozaki's mouth the most. He said it more often than "What a masterpiece." That was certainly another bother. Of course, even without his apprehension towards Emoto-san, Zerozaki and Aikawa-san let out a strange atmosphere—the one loathed among the *Killing Names*, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, had seemingly always been bad at living in a group, so the cause of most problems came from Zerozaki. With the Miotsukushi Sisters present, I couldn't chase him out, so the hateful role of *Zerozaki-in-charge* was pushed onto me, but, well—that went for both of us.

Rurero-san led a therapeutic lifestyle.

Konomi-san searched for Magokoro. Everyday, she went out early in the morning and didn't return until late at night—

Next, Aikawa Jun.

Aikawa-san didn't seem to do anything in particular—rather, it was like she was waiting for something and just normally contributed her part.

As expected, while performing a task, she was better than anyone.

Cleaning, laundry, cooking, groceries.

Even taking care of Rurero-san.

It would sound like a joke if I continued, but how should I put it—

She was seemingly unchanged from before.

As usual.

And that conversely created a sense of discomfort.

However, from what I could monitor, since that day, the first of November, except for when eating at the central table, Aikawa-san hardly talked to the fox-masked man.

She wasn't overtly ignoring him—but when you're at Aikawa-san's level, you can skilfully, naturally avoid the fox-masked man.

I didn't think that was a bad thing, but her acting normally during meals...was weird.

What on earth could be happening inside Aikawa-san's head?

By the way, during this cohabitation, the fox-masked man was the only one to achieve the great feat of not doing a single task.

I had to tell him "If you aren't doing anything, at least take the dishes out of the dishwasher," but it didn't have any effect. Even though Misora-chan and Takami-chan would at least clean the courtyard if I told them to...

Mr. Fox doesn't have to.

Mr. Fox doesn't have to.

You go work for Mr. Fox's share.

You go work for Mr. Fox's share.

When I went to ask them for advice, well, it went like that. As for Konomi-san, it was needless to ask her.

The fox-masked man's feelings were even more unclear than Aikawa-san's.

How did he see Magokoro—

How did he see the current situation?

Really, I couldn't figure it out.

Similarly to Aikawa-san, if I talked to him, he would behave as usual. I got into a few arguments with his arrogant, "king of the castle" attitude, but—

That was it.

That was really it.

It soon became too cold to just wear a swimsuit, so Emoto-san started wearing leg warmers and scarves. Her fashion sense, which became even more nonsensical, frightened Zerozaki. The sight of Zerozaki shivering in a corner of the room was funny, so I once tried to leave him alone without my assistance, but I was nearly killed later. After that, I helped him every time. As we were doing that, I realized that Emoto-san really had been a bully in her past.

With...all of that.

With all of that.

It kind of reminded me of the apartment before Magokoro demolished it—there were a lot of problems, and no shortage of troublemakers, but—

Honestly, it was fun.

That life—it continued for 10 days.

And that was—

My final time in tranquility.

"I found Magokoro-san."

I finally got the phone call from Konomi-san—the twelfth of November.

It was an unremarkable day.

Just a normal day, I thought.

"Try to pretend you're going on an errand... Let me see, head towards the place where you used to live, the grounds of that apartment."

2

"Honestly—I don't particularly want to brag about my ability, but I think no one else but me would have been able to find her."

At the place where the apartment collapsed—the scene I hadn't seen in a long time had become a clean vacant spot—that was the first thing Konomi-san, who was waiting for me there, said.

"Because Magokoro-san—she manufactured a space."

"...Eh?"

"As I said, Magokoro-san."

Konomi-san said.

"Ueeh, how shall I put it, it really feels like she stole my trademark."

"Your trademark... That shouldn't be something you can easily copy, right? That superpower—"

"Superpower... Who said such a thing?"

"Izumu-kun."

"... That's why I was bad with him—while being the one with inhuman strength, he treated everything else as supernatural. Space Creation is just a technique. Basically anyone can do it."

"Anyone?"

"As I said, it's similar to your nonsense."

"..."

"You don't seem convinced. I am not too fond of you making that face."

"But—erasing everyone from a train wagon, or moving the two middle people of a group of four walking in a diamond shape to another place—it's clearly not a normal technique, is it?"

"There's a limit to people's cognitive abilities. That's why, if you surpass that limit—the space appears there by itself. A so-called blank of the mind."

"Blank of the mind? Isn't manipulating minds Jikoku-san's domain?"

"No, as I said, what I use isn't the mind but something outside of it. It would be easier to just show you... Errr, let me see. Then, let's say this is a service."

There, Konomi-san grabbed my right hand with both her hands as if preparing a palm reading—

Then let out a bright smile.

And pushed it right on her chest.

"...Ko-Konomi-san!"

"Done. Your mind just got filled with lewd thoughts. How filthy," Konomi-san freed my hand and said so in a very amused tone. "Now, how did it feel?"

"Eh, no, thinking calmly, it was the middle top part, so I didn't get to feel much—wait, no, that..."

"I was asking about your foot, which got stepped on."

"..."

"The principle is the same—in this case, the technique was focusing the opponent's attention on one point and making everything else blank. Well, when hearing a coin fall, anyone gets sensitive. At that moment, they become defenseless. It's the same impression."

"O-okay..."

Although there were probably many other comparisons...

I couldn't seem to understand her.

And in this person's case, she played out that *obscure* part on purpose, which made it even more of a hindrance.

A calculated ambiguity.

A highly computed mystery.

"Inversely, you can make someone's mind split its focus on everything else—and leave out a single point. Of course, when it came to vast places like the Imperial Garden, it was hard, you know? I spent my time making phone calls here and there."

"..."

It includes quite a lot of plain tasks, being a Space Creator.

Work on the backstage...

"In the subway too, it was the same thing—you were focused on Noise from the get go, so it was pretty simple. Rather, in reality, I was sitting right next to you that day."

"...Seriously?"

"This plain getup is also for that sake—in reality, I prefer things like goth loli. I also want to make my hair blond, but I'll wait to retire before doing that—I'm jealous of Emoto-san's free fashion. That said, in a sense, that's Space Creation in itself."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, after all, disguises are used when you don't feel like exposing your true self. So in reality, when confronted with her swimsuit and white blouse, her clothes' impression is so strong no one will pay attention to her nature at first, right?"

"Yeah, you have a point."

"That's a shell. For Emoto-san."

"..."

"Emoto-san wants it to be armor, but unfortunately, that kind of Space Creation isn't strong enough to not get smashed into pieces by just getting hit."

Huh...

Well, now I've gotten to know how Space Creation worked. In reality, it was probably much more complex, and in order to reach Konomi-san's level you'd have to go through many steps. But my temporary understanding was that it was akin to creating a *blank of the mind*, that simple expression was sufficient.

So it wasn't much of a superpower...

Rather, the same as Rurero-san's, it was just a technique.

For Izumu-kun, who required a simple and clear explanation for everything, no matter how it was explained to him, it couldn't be anything

but a superpower in his mind. Also—in Konomi-san's case, what was frightening was that this *abnormality* didn't look like a *technique*... In Izumu-kun's eyes, she was probably really hard to deal with.

"Although I wasn't on bad terms with Rizumu-san. Her investigative prowess was extremely valuable for me."

"Yeah, Rizumu-chan was a girl who could be friendly with anyone. In front of her, the Nonsense User or the Space Creator stand no chance."

"...May I ask one thing?" Konomi-san changed her tone. "Concerning the Niounomiya Siblings, even if Rizumu-chan's existence is still in the range of tolerance—why did you forgive the Miotsukushi Sisters, I cannot understand that—"

"Forgive? If you're talking about them killing Zukin-chan—you're off the mark. I haven't forgiven them. I just currently have no choice so I'm cohabitating with them. Even for Izumu-kun—it's not like I'd forgiven him."

"No, it's a problem of meaning. Even if we use similar techniques, you and I stand at different positions—that's why I accepted your investigation request. However, seeing your attitude towards the Miotsukushi Sisters, I have some doubts."

"Doubts... Is it?"

"If," Konomi-san glanced at me fiercely and continued. "**If you are...feeling pity towards Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, who were raised as professional killers**—that's wrong."

"..."

"No, it's fine to empathize with them—just empathizing is within your freedoms. However, forgiving them because of that would be wrong in my opinion," Konomi-san continued. "I mean—then, anything would become allowed, wouldn't it? If you forgive everything because of pity, nothing would get settled, would it?"

"...Konomi-san-"

"It's fine for me—because I am merely someone **from this side**. But...if you are trying to reason with us, I think that's wrong. Seeing the Miotsukushi Sisters, that Demonic Killer and you acting all friendly—makes me worried. Honestly, that sight—it’s disgusting."

"I'm not trying to act friendly."

"Even then. If you intend to meet Magokoro-san with that spirit, I think that's wrong. Because that'd be something anyone else could do."

"...It's not like that. Konomi-san," I said. "Previously—I was told the same thing by a certain girl. That girl was Konomi-san's junior and Shiogi-chan's right hand. In other words—someone who **grew up in that kind of place**, a soldier and a berserker. To be frank—she wasn't sane. Rather—she didn't possess anything like a personality. Just flimsily swaying between this world and the nirvana—that girl whimsically drifted towards the frontlines, and asked me. 'Do you have a reason that can stand up to all of ours for being here?' 'Just rejecting it, saying it's abnormal or unrealistic or something, that's cowardly.' 'Don't deny people so simply.' I just recently heard about it from Zerozaki, but...she very rarely spoke sentences of more than three lines that made sense to anyone."

Her, the one called Yamitsuki.

That girl—

I was probably the first ordinary person she’d ever seen.

"I don't have any," I clearly said. "Any reason that can stand up to Misora-chan's or Takami-chan's—any reason that can stand up to Zerozaki Hitoshiki's or Niounomiya Izumu's. I don't. I don't have a lack of reason that can stand up to their lack of reason."

"..."

"I don't understand. I don't understand, so—I can't complain. Jikoku-san said he pitied Magokoro—and I probably do so too, but at the very least—I cannot empathize with Misora-chan and Takami-chan. I don't even have a margin—for pity."

"...Now I'm convinced."

Konomi-san said, and nodded.

"Convinced?"

"Yes. **About why the Miotsukushi Sisters don't kill you—**"

"...?"

Um?

Isn't that just because Zerozaki is there?

"No, don't pay it much attention—I'm just talking to myself."

"Okay... Well, setting that aside. In the end, where was Magokoro?"

"Unexpectedly, nearby."

"Heh?"

"Kitano Tenmangu."

"..."

"It's just there."

That was indeed—

Like the distance between the nose and the mouth, not even ten minutes apart on a stroll. Certainly, that reminded me, in May, that was where Akiharu-kun—Usami Akiharu and I talked for the last time. Wasn't that precisely at Kitano Tenmangu?

"Honestly, it was a blind spot—it seems Magokoro-san was always there."

"Blind spot...so, a Space Creation?"

"It wasn't simply that, but the principle is the same. After all, I used my ability numerous times in front of Magokoro. She learned by watching and plagiarized it."

As expected of Humanity's Last—

Konomi-san said.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Good grief,"

"She has always been excellent at that—the so-called learning by watching. I'm just guessing, but when she demolished this apartment without leaving a trace, I think she used Izumu-kun's technique, *Eating One*. She can copy anything she's seen at least once."

Rather than a copy (reproduction), it's more of a complete (completion) though.

"Then—maybe even Thought Manipulation..."

"It's certainly possible."

As for Kino-san's *poison*, that was something he set up in his body beforehand, so it wasn't doable like the others, though.

"That's precisely the meaning of Humanity's Last. There is nothing that someone can do that Magokoro can't—that's what it is. Well, in a certain manga, she would be called an ultimate lifeform."

"Yeah. Although I don't know of this manga..."

"Eh?"

I was taken aback.

"What are you doing?"

"..."

Konomi-san was taken aback too.

Cough cough, I cleared my throat,

Konomi-san corrected her stance.

Constant adaptation.

Ready wits.

"Humanity's Last...not being the Worst or the Strongest, the manufactured Humanity's Last. However—then, something wouldn't quite make sense."

"What is it?"

"Why is Magokoro-san so small-built?"

"..."

Konomi-san didn't seem to be waiting for an answer—she was just wondering to herself, and so she continued.

"That was weird from the start—if she truly was the *last form*, the *complete form*, wouldn't something like Aikawa Jun's build be more appropriate? The length of those arms, the length of those legs... I was not informed of Overkill Red's exact age, but her outward appearance, mid

twenties... Aren't the mid twenties a human's most active period? Then the ideal appearance should be close to that—so why would Magokoro maintain a build that couldn't even pass as a teenager?"

"Isn't that just one of the unconscious limitations she put on herself? Apart from Magokoro, I have a friend—I had a friend who was similar. She stopped her own growth—to a complete halt. She was a foolish one—"

...Well, there was also the case of the triplet maids who didn't follow any such rules, but that had its own charm to it, so that one was fine.

"Anyhow—this might end up in a talk about topology, but I was able to find her in a mere ten days because I was the Space Creator. As someone used to creating space, I recognize where blank spots in the mind would be born."

"If they show their right hand, look at the left one, is it?"

That reminds me, when was it again, Kouta-san said something on the lines of "If you want to hide a tree, set it up in front of everyone," but in Konomi-san's case, she was probably well versed in both hiding it in the forest and in public view.

"Then shall we go? Kitano Tenmangu is pretty vast. Where exactly was she hiding? Was there even a rain shelter there?"

"I shall explain it on the way," Konomi-san said as she started walking. "How was everyone else behaving?"

"Aah—well, as usual. There wasn't anything special... But, I still can't tell what Aikawa-san and Mr. Fox are thinking. Especially Mr. Fox—I wonder what he thinks about Magokoro? Did you hear anything, Konomi-san?"

"I did ask, but it didn't go well. Rather—now, Mr. Fox might not care about anything."

"Isn't that his normal self?"

No matter what occurs, no matter what happens—

No matter what becomes, no matter what doesn't happen—

In the end, it's the same.

So everything—doesn't matter.

There is only one important thing—

"It's not that," Konomi-san said. "Even that one thing that should be important, the *end of the world*—he doesn't seem to care about it."

"...Eh?"

As expected—they had known each other for way longer.

Konomi-san was apparently able to read a clear difference from the fox-masked man's behavior as of the last ten days.

"As we thought, the shock was big—with Jikoku-san's betrayal. Since they shared the same goal."

"No, I don't think that's the case. A member of the *Thirteen Stairs* since its foundation is saying that, so it can't be wrong—anyway, in that sense, Mr. Fox has been constantly betrayed until now."

"..."

"He is first-rate in terms of bringing out the talents in someone, but, you know, given how his personality is, although he is good at seeing through people, he doesn't look at people. Even if this case was special... Mr. Fox isn't the type to be shaken by just Jikoku-san alone."

"Jikoku-san said that himself too, but—then, what didn't he like? Of course, it's not like he feels empty after his dream became reality... In the end, you haven't been ordered to *search for Magokoro* by Mr. Fox, have you, Konomi-san?"

"Yes. Although I was surprised. He said something like 'If she's coming, she will come even if we leave her alone, no need to search for her.'...Aah."

And—

Then, Konomi-san stopped her legs and turned around to face me. She stared at my face for a while before starting to move again.

"...? What is it?"

"No—I think it's better to tell you beforehand so I'll say it. About Magokoro—your deduction was on the mark."

"Heh?"

"Magokoro-san—has no desire for revenge."

Konomi-san continued, still looking ahead.

"Not against Mr. Fox, nor against you—and of course, neither against the ER3 System, she is apparently—not thinking of revenge at all."

"...Did you perhaps have a talk with Magokoro?"

"No. She didn't escape after I came this close, so I didn't approach further than needed. After all, she has identified me. Even if I erased my presence, I couldn't really enter from the front gate where she could see me."

"But, then, how did you she—"

"At first glance."

Konomi-san said.

"**At first glance—it will be obvious**."

"...?"

"Aah, maybe Mr. Fox knew that... Although I'm just repeating what I told you last time, you could reach that answer only because you trusted Magokoro. That it was a thought Mr. Fox couldn't have... But if that was—self-**evident for Mr. Fox**."

Not by trust—

If he just knew.

"Yes. However, I don't get why Magokoro ended up **like that**."

"You are...talking pretty vaguely, huh."

"Sorry...I'm also confused. I have no Space Creation trick for that," Konomi-san said. "Please tell me one thing, Nonsense User-san—meeting Magokoro-san, what do you intend to do? What do you intend to talk about?"

"Nothing much—just like with Jikoku-san, improvising. This one is just not a rush job," I answered. "Just, well...I simply want to save her..."

"Save, is it?"

"Yes—what about it?"

"Just wondering whether you can."

A streetlight.

A pedestrian crossing.

Beyond that—we could see the Kitano Tenmangu.

A big, giant torii.

After going through that...there would be Magokoro.

"That's where I stop."

"Eh?"

"Beyond here, please continue alone."

"...Err, is it because Magokoro—might use Thought Manipulation after learning it?"

When I met Jikoku-san, Konomi-san stayed outside for that reason—so maybe it was the same this time? However, Konomi-san swayed her head.

"It's not about whether she can use Thought Manipulation or not. I'm simply not involved in this—of course, you can rely on me for not letting hindrances enter. For your date. However, since Magokoro-san herself can do it, it might be unnecessary... Yes, I'll admit it. Although I said a few things earlier...to be honest—I don't want to approach Magokoro-san."

"Why is that? Is it...dangerous?"

"No."

Konomi-san said.

"It's too painful, I don't want to look at it."

"..."

"No matter what you're going to talk about—Nonsense User-san. I recommend that you never create a blank in your mind. For your sake, and for Magokoro-san's sake."

The streetlight turned green.

Konomi-san didn't try to move.

She didn't try to say anything more.

Without having completely understood the meaning in Konomi-san's words—rather, having nearly not understood them—I took a step.

However.

A while after going through the torii and walking on the Kitano Tenmangu grounds—whether I wanted it or not, I would be forced to comprehend it.

I thought it might have been a corpse.

I thought it was a corpse.

I couldn't see anything else.

Extremely naturally—

Extremely commonly.

Extremely brazenly, melted among the scenery, not to talk like Konomi-san, but—if it was anyone else, they probably wouldn't notice that it was a human.

Rotting away—

Simply waiting to rot away until no end,

Just simply waiting,

A body.

That thing—was lying.

Facing upward.

Eyes open.

Standing watch.

Decaying.

Looking—at the sun up in the sky.

As if trying to crush its eyes.

Silently watching.

Silently decaying.

How long had it not slept for?

Under its eyes, deep black marks were engraved.

The clothes were in shambles too.

Barefoot.

Dirty all over.

No, not...dirty.

Filthy.

The most prominent aspect was its hair's color.

The orange color that was once beautiful and vivid—

Was now like rust.

Rust color.

The braids were so loosened,

They had lost their original form,

And were entangled with each other.

It was hollow.

Its existence itself was—faint.

"...Ma—"

I tried to call out—but hesitated.

A bad feeling—caught me first.

For instance—something like the feeling of witnessing a slaughtered corpse, alike the feeling of witnessing a decapitated corpse—

A bad feeling.

A sickly feeling.

Space Creation—

Konomi-san only said that.

I see, indeed.

Even I—

If I could, I wouldn't stop here.

If it were someone else's business—

If I could just ignore it, I would have.

But—

No matter its appearance.

What was here—was my friend.

It involved me.

"Magokoro."

"..."

"Omokage—Magokoro."

"Aah—I was wondering who that was. So it's Ii-chan."

That voice sounded like someone who’d traveled for a week in a desert—however, Magokoro answered me with a seemingly conscious mind.

"Keh...Geragera...I knew Ii-chan would have been the one to call out to me...though I was in the midst of testing which would come first, between that and death."

"Hold on—I'll go buy water around here."

"It's fine...there's water here and there. Also, it looks like it'll rain tomorrow."

"..."

"I thought I might be able to die by starving, not eating or drinking, but I guess it won't be that simple. This body is...quite good at surviving."

"You... What are you doing...?"

"...If you want to talk, let's go somewhere else."

Magokoro—

I didn't know exactly which muscles she moved in what way, but still facing up, without changing her form much, she jumped up and straightened up.

In shambles—

Her appearance was in shambles—

But her physical abilities didn't seem to have diminished.

"Hey, aren't you nearly naked? Yeah just hold on, I'll buy you clothes—aah, no, the bathhouse before that...your hair too!"

I extended my hand—and touched Magokoro's hair.

And, that.

That felt like touching wires.

"—Wasn't it the feature you liked the most?"

"Ii-chan remembers every single thing from the past—so I'm bad with you," Magokoro said in a wrinkled voice. "It's fine, don't mind it. It's not like anyone's looking at me."

"...Looking."

I wasn't dull enough to not notice that she didn't mean it just because of the Space Creation she cast.

So—I didn't say anything more.

Magokoro,

"Gerageragera."

Producing a high-pitched laughter, she walked further in the Tenmangu, still barefoot. There, she arranged a bunch of stones where moss was sprouting in the form of a chair and sat on them. I thought you could easily slip on them, so I didn't sit next to her—

I firmly set my legs in front of Magokoro.

Crossed my arms.

And faced her.

"...I have a planet's worth of questions. But for starters, what's vague—what in the world were you doing?"

"A premature suicide."

Magokoro answered naturally.

"Even if I want to die, it's not like I'm living."

"You are living. In front of me."

"Geragera. Ii-chan is so front-facing."

Magokoro said.

"Did you know? Since way back—I always liked that part of Ii-chan."

"Now and before, I've always been back-facing. I'm only looking at the past. I can't see the future at all. If I could even have a glimpse of it—I wouldn't have let you end up in this state."

"Is that so? I quite like it myself. This state—well, in the end that's just—a shell."

"A shell?"

"Empty."

"...I see."

I untied my arms and shrugged.

"Everyone...is worried. What are you doing here?"

"...Everyone," Magokoro looked down and said. "How is everyone doing?"

"How, you say—"

So—you're concerned.

About the people from the apartment.

"—they were all temporarily sent to the hospital, but now everyone but Houko-chan got discharged. In Houko-chan's case, she just caught the flu in the hospital, nothing to do with what you did."

"I see."

Strictly speaking, you could say Houko-chan was being restrained by Rabumi-san, but the serious mood would get ruined, so I held off.

I didn't call her a dakimakura by mistake.

"The apartment is now gone though—so everyone scattered to a friend's or family's house."

"I wonder—whether it won't go back to how it was before now."

Magokoro said in a weak tone, atypical of her.

"Because I—I broke it so it wouldn't go back."

"..."

"Even though they were like family. That apartment was—

"Even though they were like family."

I—agreed with Magokoro's words.

"...A home, huh."

"I don't have them—neither a home or a family. That's why—that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why! That's why—I broke it, I think."

That's why.

She destroyed only the apartment.

This skilfully—this precisely.

Without leaving a shred, without leaving a trace.

Nowhere to be seen, in a single blow—

"...Your heart."

I said.

I had noticed—for some time. No, Konomi-san had already shown hints of that.

"Did you know a Thought Manipulation technique was casted on your heart?"

"Mm? Yeah."

Magokoro said, as if it didn't matter.

"I already removed that thing."

"Eh?"

"I said I removed it. It wasn't a big deal at all."

"You removed it...but how?"

"Aah, err you see..." Magokoro raised her face as if it was a hassle, and tapped her left chest with her fingers. "If my heart was being used like a pendulum for the technique, I just needed to perturb my heart's rhythm. It's just that simple."

"But the heart is an involuntary muscle, so you can't influence it with your own will, right? It shouldn't have been something you could remove by just hitting a sprint and getting your heartrate up."

"Ii-chan should understand it—the fundamental reason why I'm being called the Orange Seed. That's because I can precede any reason and rewrite myself—because I can control myself completely. The mechanism under the heart's movements is really simple, you know—it's essentially an electrical signal. The same as for the brain's mechanism. Fundamentally, the mechanism for any human living is all electric signals. A certain part of the heart reacts to the produced signal, a defined rhythm is only engraved by that. Even if you use grandiose words like involuntary to describe it, that mechanism is exceedingly simple."

"Hmm...I didn't know that. So?"

"So—look."

Magokoro pointed at my back.

At Kitano Tenmangu's parking lot.

In the past, that's where I was handed Mikoko-chan's vespa by Akiharu-kun.

Parking lot.

"I gulped a battery from a car around there and electrocuted my heart."

"...Like a massage from an electrical shock?"

"Other than that, I could have stopped my heart... Well, there's lots of ways."

"Yeah..."

I see...

It was an incredibly brute force method—but certainly, it worked.

To stop a technique being constantly casted—that might have been the only way. I see, I was too caught up in my narrow view—no, however, only Magokoro would stay alive after something like that. No matter what, something so against common sense was outside of Jikoku-san's expectations.

"I see—that's why you chose Kitano Tenmangu. After all, this is where there are the most cars around here."

The tension coming from plugs wouldn't have been much for Magokoro. So she stayed at Tenmangu after that.

What a bother of a story.

"...Then you—your mind wasn't entirely dominated by the Thought Manipulation, right? If you truly rampaged...and were released, you shouldn't have been able to get that idea."

"Yup."

Magokoro nodded.

However—so, on the same day as when she destroyed the rundown apartment—probably around when I was heading to the Saitou Clinic, she was already released from that Thought Manipulation? When I heard about

the last *technique* from Rurero-san—she had already, on her own, independently—done something about it?

"The spell I casted on myself—wasn't so weak it'd be fully released by hypnosis of that level."

"..."

Kunagisa.

Kunagisa Tomo—The Blue Savant.

"Then—really, what are you doing in this place? Why won't you come back? Are you concerned because you hurt everyone? Then I won't tell you to not worry about it, but when I told them about you, everyone was worried."

"I don't deserve to cause you worries."

"Who needs anything to deserve worries?"

"You need qualifications for it. ...Ii-chan. Returning, but where? Where should I return? I have already destroyed the one place I could have returned to."

"I'm not talking about that—"

"**I'm the one talking about that**."

Magokoro said strongly.

Strongly enough to make me flinch.

"Hey, Ii-chan. Even if it was only half-assed—even if it wasn't complete, even if I removed it immediately, I—at that time, it's true that I was *released*."

"...Magokoro."

"Do you get it? The reason I did that—it wasn't Tokinomiya Jikoku or his hypnosis technique's fault. It's not because I was manipulated by him. That was what I wished for and did. I wished for and destroyed it—I wished for and hurt everyone."

"No, but—"

But.

But, that's—

"There's no 'buts', in this case. I know it—it's myself, so I know it. That wasn't my feelings being manipulated—I had always been oppressed.

"I couldn't forgive.

"That kind of...tranquil lifestyle with everyone."

"..."

Couldn't forgive.

Coming from Magokoro—

It was the first time I heard those words.

"I surely couldn't forgive that **this kind** of world existed—that, despite that only outrageous things continued to befall on me—I couldn't forgive that."

Forgiving.

And loving.

Magokoro—couldn't do it.

Even if...she seemed so happy.

Even if she got along well with everyone.

Deep in her heart.

The kind of life that up to then—she couldn't have brought to be even by error, the kind of world that was unrelated to her—she couldn't forgive its existence.

She couldn't forgive the existence of freedom.

And...

That's not something Tokinomiya Jikoku planted.

All of it was Magokoro's—will.

"I was shocked. To think I was yearning—wishing for such an action."

"..."

"To think my true thoughts were **like that**—I couldn't believe it. I couldn't admit that there were such repulsive, filthy thoughts inside me."

"But—"

"I—I don't want to say it myself, but I have no other choice. I thought of myself as *a good person*. I thought I was virtuous. I thought—I had to be virtuous. Even then, those kinds of true thoughts—they were inside me. That denied everything. Even though I should have been virtuous."

"B-but!"

That's...wrong.

That's not something you should hate yourself for.

That's not something to blame yourself for that much.

Undefeated and unchallenged—therefore the Last.

But that didn't mean she was upright by any means. I didn't know how much the bunch at ER3's MS-2 understood that, but—her uniqueness wasn't any reason for Magokoro to be a saint.

That's a misunderstanding.

Saitou Takashi probably understood that.

Magokoro—was hurt.

Having led a life constantly being hurt, there's no way her body wouldn't be full of wounds.

If you're wounded, blood will come out,

If you're wounded, it'll hurt.

That's just natural.

So, Magokoro—

Was just bearing it.

But who knew that?

Being coerced to be virtuous.

The heart of the ones coerced to be clean and without fault.

I just had to remember—before each experiment frequently inserted among her daily life at the ER3—just how deeply distressed an expression she made.

How much she hated it.

What's unpleasant is unpleasant.

What's detestable is detestable.

What's scary is scary.

What's despicable is despicable.

But even then, Magokoro—

Didn't complain once.

She always tolerated it.

She always—forgave.

Therefore—undefeated and unchallenged.

For instance, someone like me, indifferent and insensitive—

Not something born from cowardice.

That's why I...

Doubled you with Kunagisa...

"Now...I can't face everyone. Even Hikari-san—I can't meet her ever again. Now, I can't go anywhere."

I can't go anywhere.

I can't go anywhere.

I can't go anywhere.

Magokoro mumbled to herself those words in repeat.

I didn't say anything.

I should have said something—in reality.

Saying that it wasn't true, that these kinds of emotions inside your heart weren't mistaken. That they were natural—that's why you're amazing for being able to restrain them. That it's something worthy of praise—I should have used every word possible and explained to her.

It should have been—simple,

It should have been easy.

How easy and simple it should have been-

To leave everything to hate—to leave everything to resentment, and directly face me or the fox-masked man. But even for doing something about her heart, that choice shouldn't have been easy for Magokoro.

Easy—and simple,

I'm sure it would have been comfortable.

To end the world—for this existence called the Last, to end the world.

But, she didn't do it.

How hard that must have been—

It would have been for the best if I explained that to her.

Really.

But...I couldn't.

Magokoro wasn't in such a shallow despair that she could be saved by that.

Jikoku-san's Thought Manipulation—

Was merely a trigger for Magokoro.

Was merely an opportunity.

"Hey, Ii-chan."

Magokoro said.

"Being alive...is boring."

"..."

"I don't—feel like I'm alive at all. Not just now, since way back—forever. Even if I want to die, I'm just living... Maybe I already died long ago. No—was I even alive from the start...? I have no memory—of being born."

Memories—of being born.

I don't have them either.

No one does.

But, even then—everyone is alive.

Living in this world.

"I don't feel alive at all...not just myself. It's the same for everyone. Everyone else—even Ii-chan, I don't know if you really exist in front of my eyes."

"..."

"I don't understand the world. Because I can't share it—with anyone."

Magokoro said.

"For example, those eyes—those orange pupils of mine. The light reflected in those eyes, my visible range is five to a dozen times larger than that of a normal person... To be honest, everything that can be called *light*, most things...even radio waves, I can see them. Only when I want to though."

"That's—the first I’ve heard of it."

"I thought you might get creeped out if I told you. Not just light too, sound, smell, taste... Everything I feel is on a different scale. That's why—the world I'm seeing is totally different from everyone else's."

The cook from the Wet Crow's Feather Island—

Concerning *taste* and *smell*, she had quite keen senses, but—even then, I'm sure she only had a fraction of Magokoro's ability.

Then.

Next to Magokoro—

What had I really seen until now?

"Please go home, Ii-chan."

After a long silence—

Magokoro casted down her eyes, probably closed them, and said so without looking at me.

"Because I noticed my true thoughts—I can't be at Ii-chan's side now. Ii-chan understands that too, right?"

"..."

"I...despise Ii-chan."

"Magokoro..."

"That fox jerk too—the ER3 too, Kokoromi-sensei too—everyone, I despise them. I hate the entire world."

I heard that voice—inside her heart.

Magokoro added.

I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.

"It was like a scream—like an angry voice. I heard my own screams. If I were to carry that disgusting self—and still try to be nearby Ii-chan. With another trigger—

"I might end up killing Ii-chan."

"Killing—me."

"Even though I love Ii-chan. Even though I should have loved this world."

"..."

I wonder—the fox-masked man.

How much of this did he understand?

Did he predict that things would end up like this? Is that why he did nothing in these last ten days—and didn't make Magokoro *end the world?*

That was quite an emotional decision.

A forceful way of thinking.

But—

Even if she told me to go home.

I couldn't—do that.

"Then, you—what are you going to do afterwards?"

"Nothing. I'm not alive, so I can't die. Well, I'll pass time sluggishly...I might meet Ii-chan if I stayed in Kyoto, so I guess I should move somewhere else...well, not like I care."

A premature—suicide.

Was that what she meant?

The meaning of casting chains upon herself wasn't an attempt to live, but simply something that the ones unable to choose death, inevitably, without fail, must choose—

Was it something that sad?

Kunagisa—

Should have done that, waiting for someone.

Yearning for me—she chained herself.

She put a lock on her heart.

"Hey—Magokoro."

"Um?"

"I did tell you about my friend—about Kunagisa Tomo, didn't I?"

"Yeah... You did. When was it again?"

"We broke up."

I said.

"It's not like we were a couple or something, and thinking about it now, we didn't understand each other enough to be described as 'on good terms'—although we were beside each other, we didn't get close. We both—somewhere in our heart, rejected the other. In my case, overtly—in Kunagisa's, she rejected me by accepting me. By affirming me—in the end, she denied me. Even though we trusted and believed in each other—it's like it was mismatched and swaying and zigzagged."

"..."

"Although we had good compatibility—I liked her, and she liked me too. But you see, we surely messed up our meeting—six years ago, when I first met Kunagisa at that sanbox—ever since the first meeting, Kunagisa and I pushed the wrong buttons."

After that—for six years.

We always continued like that.

Averting our eyes from the important things.

Melting in each other... Colluding with each other.

At times running away.

At times hugging.

At times breaking.

At times fixing.

But—

"But, we were never able—to confront each other."

"...Ii-chan, what are you trying to say?"

"We should have fought—I should have said what I wanted. The good parts, and the bad parts, the pleasant parts and the unpleasant parts, I should have clearly said them. Same for Kunagisa. She shouldn't have forgiven my everything—instead, she should have confronted me and gotten angry. Saying things like 'You useless dumbass,' and cursing at me as much as she wanted. But because we pressed the wrong buttons when we met—"

Now—

We had no other choice but to part.

We had no other choice but to bereave.

"Saying your true thoughts of when you were released definitely isn't wrong—though, of course, doing it like this time is out of the question. Also, for you, able to completely control yourself, overlapping restraint with restraint, that became your natural self. Even if that required chains on your mind, even if that required you to fool yourself, I'm sure that was your ideal self—if you want to live, not alone but with everyone else, that won't do it. You have come into contact with people and throw away your mask."

Though I'm not one to talk.

Though it's not something I should say.

But, even if that’s a sin or a taboo.

I must say it—for Magokoro's sake.

"You are too far ahead to be able to live with anyone else. As you said, no one has eyes as good as you do—so they need to get closer."

"If I get closer—everyone will get injured."

Maybe even worse.

Magokoro said powerlessly.

"There will be collateral damage...I'm envious of Ii-chan. No matter what you do, in the end everyone likes you."

"That's not—really true."

Kazuhito-san's words still stabbed at my chest.

However, that too, I understood it wasn’t something he said because he wanted to. I'm sure that was—speaking on behalf of others, I get that. Someone had to say what a normal, common person contributing to society—thought of someone like me, I get that. Kazuhito-san, who had a strong sense of responsibility had to say it, I get that.

But that made it pierce me even more.

"Everyone is in love with Ii-chan."

"..."

"I'm sure—that's because everyone understands that Ii-chan is a good guy. Yeah. At least, that was the case for me. Although you were mean, had a bad personality, and it was unclear what you thought of—even then, Ii-chan was the only one to praise me."

He was kind—

A really good guy.

"...That...might be true."

"On the other side—no one likes me. Everyone—just tries to use me. They treat me like a tool. I'm sure that's because they know—just how much of a despicable person I truly am. How much, in the bottom of my heart—I'm suppressing hatred. I liked everyone at the apartment, but somewhere in my heart, I hated them. They seemed happy, that pissed me off."

"—I see."

"People who are happy—"

Magokoro said.

With a voice filled with all the hatred she had.

"People who are happy, all of them should just die."

However, that was...

Such a tiny hatred.

And that—

Sounded like a scream to my ears.

"Then—you're fine with it, right?"

"...With what?"

"Me going home, never meeting again, and you living alone forever—no, you alone, by yourself, continuing to exist—you can bear it, right?"

I said, to strongly urge her.

I said, to incessantly attack Magokoro.

"You probably have a few to a few dozen times the life expectancy and vitality of a normal person. Not to take Rurero-san's words, but you wouldn't even drown by drinking mud lying around. You can suffer and suffer and suffer to no end, but you will surely be able to bear it. Your endurance is too great to die with a premature suicide. You will only suffer. Continue to suffer. And—when you'll be suffering, I won't be at your side. Are you okay with that?"

"..."

"If you are, I'll just go. After all, no matter what happens, I was for sure the one who opened your lock, the one who broke our promise, the one who couldn't save you, and the one who killed you once. You have a right to hate me. If you want to reject me I can't even extend my arms to you."

Therefore.

Therefore, I.

"Therefore, I—no matter how much I wish to save you—no matter how painful parting with you is, no matter how much I hate it—I will bear it. I will shut up and see you die."

"..."

"I cannot—save you."

I said—

And took one step away from Magokoro.

With just that, I came to see Magokoro as cruelly small.

Small—and far away.

"What about it? Will you be fine alone?"

"Of course I won't!"

Magokoro suddenly raised her face—

And screamed with tears on her face.

"Don't you get—I've always been telling you to save me, useless?!"

"...I get it."

I undid the step I took—closed in one more step, and firmly aligned my gaze with Magokoro's—I ran my finger through her orange hair, and hugged her small head against my shoulder.

"I've always—heard your cry for help."

And I said.

"That's why I'm going to save you."

"...But what should I do?"

Magokoro asked me while crying.

"What exactly should I do...I don't understand what living is...even now, I don't know if Ii-chan is there. For me this world's existence—is too uncertain. I don't know if I'm dead or alive. I don't know if there truly is a world. It's as if—everything has ended."

The end.

The end of the world.

The end of the Story.

It was—inevitable.

The existence of Humanity's Last.

In the first place, from the start, Magokoro—she was created and manufactured—was distributed **as an existence that had ended**, as an existence that couldn't progress any further.

Because she had ended—

She couldn't obtain anything.

Everything she looked at was something she knew.

Everything she touched was something she knew.

Seeing Magokoro experiencing the unknown at the apartment, constantly saying "Amazing"—was for me, very sad.

The world had no resistance.

The world had no firmness.

I'm sure that for Magokoro, living was simple.

Too simple.

She forgot—how to walk.

No one could teach her that.

Someone who didn't possess a hundred legs couldn't understand.

The way Magokoro walked.

Only Magokoro could understand.

Even then—she lost it.

Just by looking a little at her own true thoughts.

I'm sure what she learned then wasn't just her ugly thoughts—but also how complete the existence of the Orange Seed is—all of it.

That she had nothing behind her.

That she had nothing in front of her.

That she had nothing.

"...Just one person."

I—said.

That was something I had thought of beforehand.

What I had—decided.

"There's—just one person. That's still not over for you...**someone you haven't finished**, just one person in this world. It's still not enough to call you the Last. There is just—one incomplete spot. Just one shortcoming."

"...?"

Magokoro—

Raised her face from my shoulder.

"Who...is it? Is it Ii-chan?"

"You already finished me at the ER3—the one thing you haven't done yet is settling things with **your predecessor**."

I said.

Magokoro's orange color—
I was looking at a different world,
I looked straight into her eyes.
"You still haven't settled things—with Aikawa Jun."
"..."
"You have to settle things."

3

Since I didn't want Konomi-san to hear me—since I couldn't let her hear me, I sneakily got out of Kitano Tenmangu from the back, found a convenient spot, and there, with my phone, made a call to the Saitou Clinic.

Emoto-san answered.

"Ah...Ikkun."

"Hello."

"What happened? You didn't quite come back from your errands... So everyone's worried. Misora-chan and Takami-chan went to search for you. You haven't seen them?"

"No... Sorry, I caused you trouble. Thinking about it, I also borrowed Emoto-san's Benz. Sorry, I will come back shortly."

"It's fine...as long as you're okay. I thought you might have had a plan."

"Err—Emoto-san. Sorry, but could you give the phone to Mr. Fox?"

"Eh...? Ah, yes. Hold on. It looks like he's talking with Rurero-san on the second floor, so it might take some time."

"Yes. I'll wait, no matter how long."

A waiting melody rang.

Gymnopédies.

I was made to wait a few minutes, then the fox-masked man answered "What. Did you get lost on your way, my enemy?" in an exceedingly bored tone.

Without any greeting or preambule—

I cut to the chase, straight to the point.

"If Aikawa-san and Magokoro—fought again, who do you think would win?"

"Magokoro. It's obvious."

"Then, Mr. Fox."

I said.

"If Magokoro wins, I'll die—so if Aikawa-san wins, please die."

"..."

"I will kill you."

The fox-masked man—

After leaving a small pause,

"Kukukuh."

Laughed.

"If Magokoro wins—at that time, I just need to kill you, right?"

"Yes, exactly."

"**Saitou Takashi**."

Then.

For the first time—he named himself to me.

"It's my name—engrave it into your brain and remember it."

"...**XXXXX**."

Then—

I answered without a moment's delay.

"That's my name—There's no need to remember it. After all, it's a name you soon won't be able to forget.

ACT 22 – SCATTERING LACERATION

AIKAWA JUN

RED

0

In the end, I wonder who the bad guy was?

1

Everything started to end.

At once.

Suddenly.

As if flowing.

As if converging—it started to end.

At first—it was the Demonic Killer.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

"Then, I'll go now."

With his baggage neatly gathered over his shoulders—actually, in the first place, Zerozaki didn't have enough baggage to need to gather it—early in the morning, at an hour when everyone had yet to awaken, he sneakily appeared beside my bed and told me.

"...Is that so."

"What? Aren't you gonna stop me?"

"I'm sleepy."

"Wake up!"

"Why are you mad... Anyway, you say you want to go, but do you have a place in mind? Your clan has been annihilated, so you don't have anyone to rely on, do you?"

"Not necessarily."

Crouching to align his sight with mine, who had raised my upper half, Zerozaki laughed.

"If it's just for a short while, I have an old acquaintance I can go to. Also—well, Aniki asked me to do something. About my little sister. I thought she was a pain, so I dropped her off somewhere, but I guess I have to look after her."

"...What is that girl doing now?"

"I'm going to start searching from now on. Let me see, maybe I should rely on those *Team* guys...either way, I'll find her immediately. I told you I'm good at gathering information, didn't I?"

"I see."

"It was short-lived, but I felt some nostalgia for the first time in a while—about this kind of cohabitation. Kahahah. Although it was just temporary. Well, if this went on any longer, that pervert woman would drive me crazy, so—"

"You're really bad with Emoto-san, huh."

"I'm bad with her kind—though I don't really get why. It's instinctual. I wonder if I had some trauma in my youth?"

"Isn't that most likely because your parents had that kind of personality as well?"

"Then how would you explain my personality? If my parents were like that, I'd commit suicide. I swear—anyhow, the more I look at that woman, the more I feel like wearing a white blouse and swimsuit myself. How scary."

"That's seriously scary, yeah..."

I ended up imagining it.

Uwaaa...

Kahahah, Zerozaki laughed,

"Also."

He said.

"It seems—my role is already over."

'It’s over'—

Zerozaki said.

"So, what are you gonna do now?"

"Nothing, really—I don't really have anything to do except ending the Zerozaki. The only thing I can say with certainty is that we'll never meet again."

"I bet. I can also affirm that."

Mm? Zerozaki tilted his head.

"Setting the role thing apart, ultimately, what did I come to do **in a place like this**?"

"Isn't that obvious? You came to see me."

"No matter how free I am, I wouldn't do that."

Let me see—Zerozaki said.

"Let's just say I came to give back something from May I had forgotten. Also, on the side, getting back something I forgot—about that much. That would be the coolest."

"What is it? Is the thing you forgot your signature phrase?"

"What a nonsense."

"It's masterpiece."

"Was it masterpiece?"

"I'm not sure about nonsense."

Zerozaki simply laughed—

And I simply...did not laugh.

"Hey Zerozaki."

"What?"

"For you—"

I asked, facing Zerozaki's chest.

"—is living boring?"

"..."

Zerozaki went silent for a bit, then said,

"Nah, not really."

I nodded to that answer.

"Then, take care. Human Failure."

“Yeah. Do your best, Defective Product."

"Bye bye, Selinuntius."

"Run, Melos."

Clap clap clap.

Hitting the back of our hands with each other three times,

In the dimness, the Demonic Killer left.

In the end—speaking of the end, in the end, between Zerozaki and the fox-masked man—Saitou Takashi—what was their connection? Was there even one in the first place? It's unclear. From his half-death experience Zerozaki told me about, the fox-masked man might have had some influence on it—and he might have not. Then I'm sure that—it must have been so long ago that, whether it happened or not, it was the same.

But that's another story.

Then—

Following, the *Thirteen Stairs*.

The *Thirteen Stairs* were also meeting their end.

Readily.

With one sentence from the fox-masked man.

"I'm disbanding the *Thirteen Stairs*."

The fox-masked man said.

"Yesterday—inside me, Akira died."

The Thirteen Stairs' first step—Kajou Akira.

"Therefore—the *Thirteen Stairs* is over. I no longer need thirteen *limbs*. Just this head is enough."

Those words sounded cruel even to Emoto-san, who had essentially already quit the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Furthermore—

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Migishita Rurero.

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

The shock those girls—whose loyalty, fanaticism, fondness, and devotion on the level of self-sacrifice didn't falter against the fox-masked man, Humanity's Worst, felt—must have exceeded their imagination.

More than a disbanding, this was a dismemberment.

However, naturally, the fox-masked man didn't care—even then, due to his excessive frankness, even I was embarrassed and was about to say something, but as if stopping me,

"If Magokoro isn't aiming for me, there's no need to stay clumped with everyone."

And.

He quickly—

Left—the Saitou Clinic.

"Don't fret—I won't flee or hide. I have my own preparations to do."

Apparently.

After that, each member of the *Thirteen Stairs* took various actions—but ultimately, everyone left Saitou Clinic by the end of the day.

In that way—it ended.

It was over.

"I didn't expect to get free time like that—but there's no helping it. In this kind of case, the end is essential."

As expected, Konomi-san was strong.

Even if the result was disbandment, as the oldest member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, she couldn't continue to act pathetically in this situation. It was like that.

"Depending on how you think—for Mr. Fox, Kajou-san's death was a good thing."

"What?"

"Because in its own way, that was a spell—and a wraith."

Then, Konomi-san said.

"Well then—it might be unreasonable to say this from my position, but I'm entrusting the future to you, Nonsense User-san."

"Yeah."

The future.

Hearing that—my heart hurt a little.

My heart hurt a lot.

But—

Nothing could be done about that anymore.

After Konomi-san, next was Rurero-san.

"Don't say anything to the Doctor. She'd just end up whining."

"But—shouldn't you go back to recovering?"

"It's fine—Aah, it's not like I gave up or anything. I'm saying I'm okay now."

"...Are you going to chase after him?"

"I won't—despite how it looks, I know when to quit. The skill of being able to handle rejection is a characteristic of a good woman."

"Then why—"

"I want to be alone."

Rurero-san said in a refreshing tone.

"When I'm here, I feel fun in a weird way—it's a bit tough in sad times. ...Though I think that's mostly your fault, *Ii-chan*."

"...Rurero-san."

I—previously, said something of the sort to Rurero-san.

And decided to put my resolve into words.

"I—decided to save the world."

"..."

"I decided to fight for the world."

"...I see."

In response to my words Rurero-san made a puzzled face for a while—but ultimately gave out a light smile.

"Then, well, if we both live, we'll meet again—we might be enemies again at that time, but if I had to say, I'd be grateful if we could be allies."

Then—

Rurero-san jumped down from the second floor window.

She should still have had a leg in a plaster, but she somehow managed to land and left my field of vision by running.

So...

Well, as I had expected, the most difficult ones, the Miotsukushi Sisters, Misora-chan and Takami-chan—each sat symmetrically in a corner of the waiting room, clasping their arms around their knees.

"...You're depressing, so I'm gonna chase you out."

Emoto-san casually said something horrible.

This person, I swear.

Who knows if they heard that, but by the end of the day, these two, Misora-chan and Takami-chan stood up. Then approached me, still symmetrically.

Are they going to try to kill me again? This is bad. Why did Zerozaki leave? I thought that for an instant, but—

"We were in your care."

"We were in your care."

Misora-chan and Takami-chan both bowed and lowered their heads in a frighteningly cute way.

"Sorry for only causing trouble."

"Sorry for only causing trouble."

"No...It's fine."

"Please forgive us for nearly killing you."

"Please forgive us for nearly killing you."

"..."

It wasn't something easy to apologize for, but...

It's not something you could apologize for that simply either.

"I...we will temporarily go back to our birthplace."

"I...we will temporarily go back to our birthplace."

"Birthplace?"

Aah, I see.

The Niounomiya and their branches functioned as families, so they should have had relatives. It was hard to think Misora-chan and Takami-chan were of adult age... Umm, well, if they were *professional killers*, for those relatives, it's like these twins had been taken along by Humanity's Worst, like they were under a bad influence, so they must've been worried...

"Why not? Take the time to relax there. Well, Mr. Fox too, you see, although he said that, I'm sure he thought of you and—"

When I was in the middle of saying some kind words I didn't mean, as if to stop me, Misora-chan and Takami-chan swayed their heads frenetically.

"We don't care about Mr. Fox now."

"We don't care about Mr. Fox now."

"Eh?"

"Well then, please comfort a marvelous forthcomingness."

"Well then, please comfort a marvelous forthcomingness."

Farewell.

The two said, with their trademark simultaneity at the end, then quickly changed into their priest robes and, unlike Rurero-san, went out properly from the front gate. Politely greeting me, who was left behind, they left.

...What?

So they could do greetings and the like if they felt like it.

When I was thinking that,

"Ikkun, it's bad."

Emoto-san said.

With a light smile on her face.

"...What?"

"If you let me speak from a mental health standpoint, when people have their faith broken, their instinct is to, instead of throwing away faith, search for something else to believe in."

"In other words?"

"They fell for you!"

"Don't joke with me!"

That hypothesis made my skin shiver.

Actually, it was unclear why Emoto-san was in such high spirits. She made me think of Rizumu-chan for a moment.

"So-sorry... I-I got carried away... Wh-when I become close to someone, I-I end up talking too much... So-sorry, Ikkun, ah, of-of course now you hate someone filthy like me..."

"..."

It's a hassle when she gets hurt by my retorts...

I think it was because of the circumstances, but the closer I get to Emoto-san, the harder it becomes to handle her.

"So."

I said, still facing the front door.

"What are you going to do now—Emoto-san?"

"Eh?"

"No, for Emoto-san—whether the *Thirteen Stairs* get disbanded or not, it might be the same now—but now that Rurero-san isn't there, you no longer have a reason to stay here, do you?"

"Umm...that's... Well, really?" Emoto-san said. "...Are you telling me to get out? A-are you telling me I'm a nuisance so I should get out? C-cruel... Are you still a human? H-how, how can you say such cruel things?"

"...No, I didn't. Also you said those cruel things to Misora-chan and Takami-chan earlier..."

Keeping my speech vague to dodge the duty of retorting.

It was a new technique.

"You're not Misora-chan or Takami-chan, but...Emoto-san, do you normally have a house or something? Like how Izumu-kun had a residence to hide in."

"Mm...well, somewhat."

"Somewhat?"

"Somewhat, a mansion...or something along those lines..."

"..."

It's been a long time since I heard the word mansion.

A backdoor doctor...it's not like a bourgeois or a celebrity...

"But...I haven't been there in a while...I wonder what's up with the rights...? I just left everything up to the caretaker..."

"No, please stop...I don't want to hear about it."

"Umm...but let me see."

Emoto-san held my hands with hers.

She scrutinized it for a while.

"...Your wound has properly healed. Looks like no bacteria got in."

"Aah—from the apartment."

Emoto-san had healed my hand from when it got stabbed by shards of wood and glass. It wasn't very deep so there was no need to bandage it, but Emoto-san always paid attention to it.

"...Ikkun, you're hiding something, right?"

"Eh?"

"For Mr. Fox to say something like that so suddenly, it's strange. Akira-san was someone very important for Mr. Fox...so he shouldn't die that easily."

"Are you saying he died because of me? Because—I said something?"

"I was the one to pass the phone to Mr. Fox..."

Aah.

Right.

"Yes, then that might be right. But—Emoto-san. Of course, since you took great care of me and I caused you much trouble, if you really want to know, I will tell you but..."

"Umm..."

Emoto-san crossed her arms and closed her eyes.

It seemed she was seriously thinking.

"...Hmm. Nah...no need to."

"Are you fine with that?"

"I'm...not, but you don't need to tell me."

Emoto-san said.

"But please tell me one thing. Do you need a doctor?"

"...No."

I said.

"In the Story from now on—the role of a healer is no longer needed."

"...Ugh."

"Please don't cry..."

Like that—

Emoto-san left too.

Leaving the Benz behind, she left by foot.

You can use the car anytime you want and leave it anywhere, she said.

It's fine.

That was the cheapest one.

...

Well, I just thanked her honestly.

The *Thirteen Stairs*, the organization created so that the one who'd once had his karma severed from the world and the Story, Humanity's Worst, Saitou Takashi, could influence the world and the Story, could end the world and the Story.

Though its usefulness was pretty unclear—

Now, everything was over.

Somehow—

Of course, in most cases, the *Thirteen Stairs* were my enemies, however—even then, what was it, this feeling similar to loneliness.

It felt like looking at a movie's credits.

Rather than disappointing—it felt short.

It was painful—I couldn't feel like leaving my seat.

So...

Now that all was over.

Inside the building, only Aikawa Jun and I were left.

"Waaaai! I'm alone with Ikkun! So happy! Like 'Both hot and cold disappear when you reach the other shore, except it's Sanzu River'!"

"...Aah, that reminds me, you had that gag...though I almost forgot."

Rather, those words made it seem like she didn't like being alone with me.

Aikawa-san—

Was wearing low-rise jeans, a short, strong tank top and a bandana around her head. It was casual fashion. Up until today, she was always in her usual Contractor suit, but now that the fox-masked man and everyone from the *Thirteen Stairs* left, maybe she could relax a little.

"Hah—everyone left."

"Yes."

"Good grief—really, you've gone soft at the end. You, and that shitty dad. Why are more and more people leaving when the climax is now, when the festival is only starting? Normally you do that, you know, like in the last chapter of a battle manga. The allies that fought alongside you gather and the enemies you've stood against rush in. You have to do that, okay?"

Everyone from the apartment—

And Hikari-san, Kouta-san—

And Zeroraki—

The *Thirteen Stairs*—

"Because it's the closure, after all. We already did that in the party in September. Though, of course, it was lacking in excitement—well, thinking about this as after the festival, it can't be helped, right?"

"After the festival? Well, it doesn't really feel like it. It doesn't feel lonely, but at least it's refreshing and easy to understand. Hahah—anyhow, now we can finally talk leisurely, Ii-tan."

"Were you waiting for this to happen?"

"No, not really—I wasn't. This situation only came about thanks to your efforts."

"Though it might not be effort, but negligence."

"Heh. Well, regardless, Ii-tan has something, right? Something to tell me."

"Yes—well. But how did you know?"

"Did you also nearly forget that? Even mind reading is easy peasy, for Aikawa Jun-onee-sama."

"After all, Jun-san hasn't been achieving a lot recently—you can blame my bad memory for forgetting a few things."

"You're telling me."

Then we—moved somewhere else.

First "Let's do the naked apron play. The one who loses at rock-paper-scissors has to wear the naked apron and make dinner. " I naturally rejected that sublime proposition from Aikawa-san. We cooked dinner normally, brought it to the waiting room, and faced each other at the table.

While eating—

I told her everything up to now, except for a single point. Naturally, there must have been a lot of parts overlapping with what Aikawa-san already knew—but anyway, I told her about everything from the last few months, the last six years, and the last nineteen years.

The only point I excluded was, of course—

The personal promise with the fox-masked man.

I still hadn't told that to anyone—and didn't intend to. The fox-masked man didn't really need to stay quiet, but I didn't want Aikawa-san or Magokoro—to feel responsible.

For the fox-masked man's death.

And of course, for my death.

Aikawa-san listened to me in silence, and only when she understood I was finished,

"Hmm."

She replied with a dull answer.

"Well, it's not like I don't understand... However, that reminds me. This morning, just after my shitty dad left, you called Kouta, right? What was that?"

"Eh? Aah..."

How keen, as usual.

No blind spots or carelessness.

"That was simply a report of affairs. I was in her care for various things in this case. After all, the one who found Jun-san and Zerozaki was Kouta-san."

"Hmm... Well, it's fine."

Although Aikawa-san said that, she seemed to be slightly bothered by it, after looking at me for a moment, she eventually said "But, you know," in a voice that screamed she felt like it was a hassle, as if talking to herself.

"A rematch with Magokoro—huh."

"Aren't you feeling it?"

"No—I'm simply grateful for you creating the occasion for a revenge match. However—what does it mean?"

"..."

"I thought that this Magokoro girl had no reason to accept such a battle. To her, she already beat me with ease last month."

"Concerning that, she doesn’t seem to remember."

"Is that so. She doesn't remember, huh—how much can those words be trusted, I wonder."

"Magokoro, you see—Jun-san. **She isn't living in this world**."

I said.

Aah, I screwed up—

I remembered Kunagisa's words.

"The world is, at least up to now, built in a longitudinal way, right? But she can only move sideways—because she has nothing like a parent. I think that's the decisive difference between Jun-san and Magokoro."

"..."

"What bothered me was how Mr. Fox called Magokoro *his granddaughter*—thinking about it normally, in this case, making Jun-san and Magokoro sisters like Doraemon and Doramy would have been the most appropriate. Thinking normally."

"No no, that's thinking too far, Ii-tan. We might be fundamentally the same thing, but I'm different from Magokoro at the roots."

"Even then—it doesn't change that for Magokoro, you were not a *sister* but a *parent*."

"Oi oi—a mom, at this age? Please spare me—that said, thinking about that shitty dad's age, it's not too weird. I see... Not *siblings*, but *children*."

"So in short—Jun-san. For Magokoro, you are her only link to the longitunality of this world. Therefore, the only one able to tell her 'You are alive' is you, Jun-san."

A *parent teaching* their *child* about *life*.

That meaning was plain and clear.

But Magokoro wasn't provided with that simplicity.

Because she was excellent.

Because she was docile.

Everyone thought—

She already knew that.

Even I...I thought that at first,

Even when I understood I was wrong—I didn't do anything.

I couldn't do anything.

"Living, huh..."

Aikawa-san said.

"Aah...for instance, the Zerozaki Clan."

"Eh?"

"The Zerozaki Clan. Number three of the *Killing Names*. The guy who went out during the night. Well, he might have been an extreme example... But, generally speaking, what do you think is the part that makes them different from normal murderers?"

"...Is it that strangers hang out like a family?"

"Well, right. That's it. However, that's more of a result and not a reason—the reason I don't want to get involved with them, the reason I find them dangerous, is because they have no reason to murder."

"Reason—"

If I remember correctly, I heard about that.

I heard from Moeta-kun.

"Even then, there's a trigger—something like a trigger that leads to murder. But, however, in the end, a trigger is but a trigger—there's nothing other than bloodlust. For the most part—no matter what happens, they won't feel anything?"

"They won't feel—anything."

"For those guys to form a family—it's in order to realize they are living beings. Conversely—if they don't do that, they won't be able to feel like they're alive."

"They won't—feel."

"Ii-tan. What do you think living is?" Aikaw-san said. "You see—I think that living is *thinking you are living*."

That was—

The same as what Zerozaki said.

Precisely as Zerozaki Hitoshiki from the Zerozaki Clan said.

"I think that the recognition of your living state is the meaning of life. Isn't that why roller coasters feel good?"

Well, though I've never ridden one, Aikawa-san laughed.

"I've had experiences of being thrown into the air from an aircraft, so it's kinda the same."

"If you say it's the same, aircrafts are going to cry... Thinking that you are living, is it? Recently—that's a feeling that I've felt a lot—though long ago it was something I didn't feel at all."

Rather—

I felt like I was dead.

The same as—the current Magokoro.

It was as if I was facing myself—

Me, who never faced anything.

"Sooner or later."

Aikawa-san said.

"That's the case for everyone living on this side—it's full of guys not fully living. There's a ton of guys not living at all. That was the case for Ichihime too...for Kouta too. Everyone, they're lacking somewhere. But—there aren't many guys as lacking as you. At least until recently—I thought that."

That was—something she had already told me.

Just after the events at Sumiyuri Academy.

That I was lacking various things-

Therefore, everyone went crazy after looking at me.

Like they were looking at their own defects.

"...And now?"

"Haahn?"

"Now—what do you think? About me."

"Now and before and in the future, I think you're a wonderful guy. Heeh—aren't you the one who knows it the most? You—you, how do you think of your current, changed self?"

Having more things to protect.

Having more things I don't want to lose.

Having made a lot of things,

That I wanted,

That I liked.

I ended up realizing.

I ended up admitting.

Now I—

Even if you tore my mouth, I couldn't say that everything was the same.

Things like 'living has no meaning', or 'I'm fine with dying, or 'it doesn't involve me, or 'I'm not interested', now—

I couldn't say them.

"...To be honest, it's a pain."

"Heeh."

"But—if I had to answer, it would be 'Not much'. Not much. It's pretty unexpected, but I like it. This self isn't...bad."

With this self—

I could feel like I'm alive.

I could think that way.

"I—think I'm alive."

"Good for you, isn't it?"

"Yes," I nodded. "I think most of it was thanks to Jun-san."

"Not really...so? Now, you want me to teach that feeling to Magokoro? Want me to teach her what it means to be alive? I'm not God, you know."

"Aren't you confident?"

"What?"

"Aren't you confident you could change Magokoro's mind, Jun-san—the mind of an impertinent brat spouting narcissist, adolescent, childish thoughts?"

"...What a cheap provocation."

Aikawa-san—smiled cynically.

It felt like I hadn't seen that smile in a long time.

"And I always take on those cheap provocations."

"...Thank you very much."

"But let me hear one thing—you...you—couldn't you have persuaded Magokoro then?"

Precisely like a God, Aikawa-san asked.

"With your nonsense, couldn't you have made Magokoro *think she was living*? For you—that shouldn't have been that hard, right? Of course, that wouldn't have led her on the longitudinal plan—but couldn't you have become Magokoro's *big brother*?"

"Who knows... It's a past that didn't happen, so talking in hypotheticals is pointless... But to be honest, I won't say I could have—but I don't think that was unreasonable enough to call it impossible."

"What? So you really wanted to present me with the opportunity of a revenge match?"

"I can't say that's not the case—to be frank, I don't ever want to hear that kind of excuse from Jun-san again..."

"That was a joke. Don't take it seriously."

"I get that though."

"So, what are your true thoughts?"

"That'll probably—be the end."

I answered Aikawa-san's inquiry.

Because—it's the end.

Because everything will get cleared up with that.

These—last few months.

These last six years.

And—these last nineteen years.

Because everything—will end.

"Jun-san needs to be the one to end it—or it won't be quite right. The last of the last needs to be closed off coolly or it'll be boring. It wouldn't work with me. It won't work if it's not Jun-san."

"Han. Well said."

Aikawa-san wore a bitter smile—

Then, closed her eyes and nodded.

"Got it—though it'll come with conditions, I'll accept the request from the Nonsense User. This Aikawa Jun will contract that job."

"I'm relying on you."

"It's not a big deal. It'll be a light sweeping win."

With this—

The stage was completely set.

Now there was really only the end left.

That was what I thought.

"But—Jun-san. You talked about conditions—"

"Before that, tell me one thing," Aikawa-san said as if stopping me. "**On which side—are you betting**?"

"...Eh?"

"Don't play dumb—you're betting on who'll win between me and Magokoro with my shitty dad, aren't you? If not, there's no way Kajou Akira would die inside him."

She saw through it—huh.

Setting aside the goal of that bet, she at least saw through the contents... If possible, I wanted to keep it all a secret, but now it couldn't be helped.

I said.

"I'm betting on Aikawa Jun."

"Heeh."

"Anyone but Jun-san would be inconceivable."

"You're giving me quite the high praise—however, even then, what a reckless bastard you are. You saw me getting one hit KOed by Magokoro—right?"

"My trust for you won't be shaken with just that—it could also have been a lucky punch. Just, if..." Though with hesitation—now that I'd come this far, I thought I should express the only worry I'd been carrying... No,

concern. "If Jun-san—**isn't fine with Mr. Fox losing to me**—that's a different story."

"How foolish."

Aikawa-san said, as if it was truly stupid.

In a fed up, ridiculing tone.

"That's not an object of concern... Rather, it gives me more motivation."

"But—"

I—thought it was a fair worry.

Because—

Saitou Takashi was still... Alive.

He hadn't been—killed by Aikawa-san.

"That's not it."

Aikawa-san said.

"It's fine—then, let me see. Everyone's left—so I'll tell you. What I was up to last month."

"..."

Right... That was it.

What Aikawa-san and the fox-masked man did—

During this October.

My concern could't disappear without finding that out.

"Err, the place was...the place was...the place doesn't matter. Well, it was here and there. Here and there, all over the place. The damage done by Magokoro was big, so most of the time was spent recovering. And, the rest—I was accompanying my shitty dad."

"Accompanying?"

"Here and there, he told me to come...so I followed him. I was wondering why he was acting so sneakily, but I finally understood after hearing your story now. It's not like I couldn't get it from hearing just parts of it but—that shitty dad was running away from you."

"Well, that's certainly possible. But—Jun-san, why did you follow Mr. Fox? If it was Jun-san—though you're not Magokoro, you could have

escaped any time, right? And at that time, there was nearly nobody from the *Thirteen Stairs* near Mr. Fox—"

He had already—

Mr. Fox had already told the members of the then existing *Thirteen Stairs* that *they could betray him*, so its activities were temporarily put on hold. Even Konomi-san, I doubt she was at his side for a long period.

You're wrong, Aikawa-san said.

"I had no reason to run away—in the first place, I headed towards Sumiyuri Academy in order to kill him."

"Yeah, of course, but—"

"I was hindered by Magokoro, and, how should I put it, that threw off my timing. Although it was for his own sake, that shitty dad looked after me when I was injured—it wasn't the mood to start a fight, but I couldn't let the person I'd always been chasing flee either—so I followed him."

"I see. And so that was just a family meeting?"

Not an idyllic atmosphere.

Rather, a bloodthirsty one.

That said—that probably went along with what the fox-masked man had planned. To make Aikawa-san move, generally it was better to pull than to push.

Outdated.

He said he would use the outdated model and try out a new method to reach the *end of the world*—however, from hearing the details, it didn't seem like there was anything concrete to it. Rather, he must have been searching for a way to persuade Aikawa-san.

"However—even then, for all this time—you couldn't grasp the timing? From the way you said it, it didn't sound like you were together for just one or two days. It must have been longer, right?"

"Yeah. I also soon realized."

Aikawa-san said.

"That I let the timing slip—ten years ago."

"..."

Timing.

"If I were to kill him—I should have done it ten years ago. It seems I can't redo it."

That shitty dad—he really really really didn't care about me—Aikawa-san said.

"There was neither a retry nor a continuation. Killing him then—would have been the same as not killing him. Inside him—everything from ten years ago, except Akira, was over."

"...Was he that important? That Kajou Akira person."

"If Tokinomiya Jikoku was a companion for that shitty dad, then Kajou Akira was a partner, I guess. Something like that."

"Though Konomi-san—called him a *wraith*."

"If you're calling him a *wraith*, that shitty dad is equally one. If I take on your terms, I'm a vengeful spirit though."

"*Vengeful spirit*—"

"We can't have a great war with ghosts and apparitions, so—so, I completely let the timing slip. I realized that in the short while I accompanied him. 'Aah...**no matter how much I try**, I can't kill him.'"

Those words—

Felt like they were spit out with despair.

Aikawa-san and despair, they were too ill-matched—however, that story was based on a time when Aikawa-san wasn't the Strongest yet, so it couldn't be helped.

Before being the Strongest.

There was such a time for Aikawa-san.

'I can't kill him.'

'I can't kill—my hateful nemesis.'

'Even killing him—it would be the same as not having killed him.'

'...I questioned if you could kill people in the first place though. Since you couldn't—kill Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"Idiot. Killing someone is simple."

Aikawa-san said.

"It's too simple—so I have to raise the difficulty level to make life fun, don't I?"

"That's impressive."

"I can't kill him."

Aikawa-san said.

"I can't kill him—even if I do, it would be meaningless. Therefore—I realized. My role, the role I should accomplish for myself, the one job I should do for myself, a job not contracted from anyone else—had already been done ten years ago."

"..."

"Therefore—that's your job now."

Aikawa-san said towards me.

"The one bearing the role of stopping Saitou Takashi—Humanity's Worst, is no longer me—it's the one he calls his enemy, you, the Nonsense User."

"..."

"I'll help you."

That too, it had been a while—

Aikawa-san smiled malisciously.

"That's the first condition—I'll beat up Magokoro, so you go beat up Saitou Takashi. The only one able to stop him—is you now."

"...Yes."

I nodded.

I—

I arrived where I was supposed to—If Aikawa-san learned that the fox-masked man and I had already entered the domain where one of us had to die—would she stop me?

Would she tell me not to kill him?

Would she tell me not to get killed?

...She probably wouldn't.

Even if she thought it—she wouldn't.

It wasn’t like Aikawa-san blindly cherished life. When you should die—she clearly tells you to.

For me—

That was precisely this kind of scene.

There was worth to—betting my life.

It’s just, even then—I understood why Aikawa-san had that strange attitude ever since our reunion, but that was the same for the fox-masked man—the fox-masked man's strange behavior that Konomi-san pointed out still couldn't be explained. It was surely something about Magokoro, about Magokoro and Jikoku-san—but as Konomi-san said too, that wasn’t enough to be sure.

"What do you think about that?"

"Who knows...he was the same as usual when I was with him. Certainly, after Magokoro's *rampage*...no, *release*? After that happened, that shitty dad's behavior became weird."

"Would Kajou Akira's death—be related to that?"

"No idea. However—maybe that shitty dad saw it."

"Saw?"

"*The end of the world—the end of the Story.*"

Aikawa-san said.

"In manga, when reading the last volume, you can pretty much, like, see the remaining developments, right?"

Worthless—he said.

Of course, that might have been an assessment on the theory of Magokoro's release being the end of the world—however, what if that wasn't all?

What if there was another meaning included?

If he really—

Then, from which point did the fox-masked man—overlook and see it all?

"That person—how much of it was within his expectations, I wonder? Jikoku-san's actions towards Magokoro seemed to be completely outside of his reading, but—thinking back on it, since the first time we met...he knew beforehand..."

Beforehand—it was like he had expected it.

Like he had understood everything.

Like he had seen it—through its very last moments.

“It kind of felt like that."

"Who knows. Maybe he just wasn't thinking of anything."

Aikawa-san made a forced smile.

"Well, anyway, the end is near—let's stay fired up a little more, Nonsense User."

"Yes—Jun-san, what are you going to do afterwards? After—everything is over."

"Ahn?"

"I guess you're going to continue your contractor job?"

"You don't even need to ask—that's like my calling. No, not that—it's my role as someone created as a *limb*, I guess."

"Even if you know you can't kill him...you don't intend to become Mr. Fox's *limb*?"

"No way."

Aikawa-san said.

"...Hm. In reality, I was a little—yeah, as you and that pretty boy were worried about, I thought reconciling with that shitty that might have been an option...cause it's not like we were on bad terms from the start."

Therefore—

Recently, it felt like returning to that time.

Aikawa-san said—

And showed a slightly grieving expression.

No, not grieving—

Simply nostalgic.

Of the time before she became the Strongest.

"Maybe since I had that dream...that he could reform, it's as everyone says, that I'm a soft person. It's fine. That's how I am. More importantly—rather than me, how about you, huh?"

"Eh?"

"Whacha gonna do—no matter the result, in the end, the war between you and that shitty dad will be concluded. It's the end, Nonsense User. After everything ends—what will you wish for?"

"..."

The end.

After everything—ends.

It was just a proposal for a summer job. Assistant Professor Kigamine setting her eyes on me—that was the start of my meeting with the man wearing the fox mask.

"...I."

"After that, can't you return to your daily life? These last few months have been rough, but—no, of course, your life has been rough since even before meeting that fox jerk—but can't you draw an approximate line between happiness and misery? You'll finally—be able to return to a normal lifestyle, won't you?"

"Honestly—I just feel like isolating myself on a mountain, though."

"What? Are you concerned about what Kazuhito told you? You should just—"

"No, of course, that's part of it—but."

But.

That had nothing to do with me.

That small detail—had nothing to do with me.

"Because—I don't have Kunagisa anymore."

I said.

"In the first place—I only had Kunagisa in mind. Kunagisa was the genesis and everything. No...though I was grandly rejected, but—even then, if Kunagisa wished for it, even now...I would throw away everything I care about and give up on everything I want."

"..."

"To the point you could call everything else a replacement for her—but, even then, she is no longer—at my side."

No longer.

Kunagisa was...no longer.

Really—why is that?

Kunagisa released the spell she had on me.

At the very end, she released me.

However...

Even if she didn't do that, I.

Even if I was restrained with chains—

"Just being by your side...was enough for me."

Then why—

Why did she ask for something like dying together?

It's not that, is it?

The words you should have directed towards me—

It shouldn't have looked like that, right?

"If you had told me to live with you—I would have jumped off without a second thought."

Now—Kunagisa was no longer.

I wasn’t even sure whether she was living or not now.

Quite a bit of time had passed since then.

She might have died by now.

Kunagisa Tomo might have died.

I wasn’t even allowed to know that.

Therefore—

"Therefore—to be honest, from here on I don't know...how I should live. I didn't think there would have been a future after parting with Kunagisa... On top of that, in my mind, I don't even know if there's a future after—saving Magokoro."

"Why don't you just redo it?"

Aikawa-san—

Plainly said those words.

"By Kunagisa-chan rejecting you—and by you rejecting Kunagisa-chan, all the buttons that had been wrongly pushed up to now have been removed, right? Then—why don't you start again from the start?"

"...You make it sound easy. But now, Kunagisa..."

"As if I could say it easily."

"..."

"Aah, when was it again—I heard. That Kunagisa-chan didn't have long to live. But—it's not like there was no way to make her survive, was it?"

"..."

That's—she said it.

With a number that wasn't a percentage.

"Things with a one in a million chance can happen on the first try—that goes for one in a billion too. I don’t believe even for a second that Kunagisa-chan died, you know?"

"...You are—"

You are really—strong.

I—realized that once more.

Even covered in dirt.

Even covered in blood.

You are truly—the Strongest.

"...Unlike the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro and Overkill Red, Aikawa Jun, created to be the excellence of humanity... Kunagisa Tomo was born naturally, a product of coincidences and an inevitability, a genuine and pure

blooded Blue," I said. "Since she is natural—she has a bad balance. Frankly, the worst. Her talent is too one-sided. Living on is difficult—more than that, it's normally impossible. However, with her excellent talent, with the excellent parts of her talent, she made up for it. She cast chains on herself...and unconsciously made herself a personality. The result of that was a work of art, a creation not of humans but God, and a creation of herself too—the Blue Savant, Kunagisa Tomo."

Pure-blooded and pure-bred from birth—

She couldn't have been more pure.

Mesmerizing many people—

Making the lives of many go awry.

An extraordinary genius.

An extraordinary existence.

"Therefore—it's not like there are no means. If—Kunagisa abandoned most...no, all of her talent. Throwing away the proof of recessiveness—is something she can do intentionally. She is—a natural, and like the Orange Seed, she can control herself completely. She can manipulate her own nerves—I'm sure she could even stop her heart through pure will. But—that's a painful decision for her."

I mean—

That would mean losing everything.

Everything she currently has,

Everything she had built up to now, losing it all.

Everything important—and everything she wanted.

Lose everything.

Could she do it?

Was Kunagisa attached to this world enough—

To allow that?

For her, a fundamentally greedy and possessive girl—

Wouldn't she prefer throwing away her life,

Than losing everything she possessed?

No, in the first place.
Was dying—
For Kunagisa, something to rebuke?
Perhaps...
I couldn't deny that thought.
Noise-kun's words came back to me.
Kunagisa Tomo—from the start.

Didn't she—feel like dying?

Since before I started to change.
She couldn't hold me in place.
No, in the first place—
Ever since that day six years ago.
Ever since she met me—at that sandbox.
Then...
That would mean, I.
"For Kunagisa—what in the world was I?"
"Who knows. Don't ask me. That kind of stuff—ask her in person," Aikawa-san said. "Reminds me...about Kunagisa-chan's talent...about the vessel for her talent, your little sister became a sacrifice, right? Though I don't really know... At first, didn't you pretty much resent Kunagisa-chan? Why—where did that change? Your hatred wasn't so light that it turned into love like in a cliché shoujo manga, right? Regardless of whether Kunagisa-chan was also a sacrifice for the Kunagisa Syndicate in a sense—that shouldn't have had anything to do with you, right?"
"..."
"Or did you simply overlap her with your little sister? Didn't you also—just overlap Magokoro with Kunagisa?"

"Now all of that is from pretty long ago—I no longer know what was true. All of it might be a wrong impression and just me following the flow on the spot. After all, memories end up dramatized no matter what—"

"Then, let me rephrase my question."

Then—

Aikawa-san said.

"Having been rejected by Kunagisa-chan—do you still like her?"

"I love her."

I answered Kunagisa.

"I like her to an unpleasant degree—I love her to a hateable degree."

Aah...

How foolish.

How extremely pitiful.

In the end—it wasn't about that.

The curse Kunagisa cast on me was—

Even now—it still hadn’t lifted.

"Then—you now have something to do after everything ends."

"No...but—that's like what happened ten years ago for Jun-san...I already let the timing slip away."

"I'm not like you two."

Aikawa-san said, as if it was natural.

"You two are still kids."

"..."

"So you can still redo it at least once."

"...I wonder."

Could we redo it?

Although it had ended—

Could we start anew one more time?

Can we say—"Nice to meet you" for the first time?

As long as I lived.

As long as she didn't die.

As long—

As long as she wished to continue living.

As long as she chose life.

"Yeah. I'll put in a coin for you. So—promise me. That's another condition for me to take on your job. After everything ends—go see Kunagisa-chan. Then talk to her once more. The **ending** between you and Kunagisa-chan—won't end up like that. I won't admit it."

Aikawa-san smiled fearlessly.

Warping her lips to the fullest, squinting her eyes.

"Let's go with the royal road, the royal road. What are you doing, showing off your quirkiness? Let's end it normally. Normal is fine. Normal is the best for everything. It's the **ending** of a miserable guy like you and an unreasonable girl like Kunagisa-chan, you know—

—I won't accept anything other than a happy ending."

2

On that day's evening.

My destination, after having gone out for errands, was a meeting with Kouta-san.

"This is what you requested", she handed me a white paper box.

That was a combination of iron and gunpowder.

A 41AE.

And a dozen bullets, meant to kill people.

ACT 23 – THE END OF THE STORY

SAITOU TAKASHI

WORST

0

Goodbye.

1

The stage for the decisive battle was Sumiyuri Academy.
Among the ruins that had already met their end.
In the second gymnasium—
There were four people, all silent.
As if to replicate the scene of that day—
As if to redo it all over again.
Saitaou Takashi and I were on the stage.
Aikawa Jun and Magokoro were,
In the center of the gymnasium—facing each other.
Facing each other at a certain distance.
Existing.
Existing there.

Silently.

Existing—together.
Until now, I hadn't heard anyone's voice. Of course, my own voice included. Driven by Aikawa-san in Emoto-san's borrowed car, we arrived at Sumiyuri Academy. By that time—
Those two were already there.
Saitou Takashi and Omokage Magokoro.

Although I did not put it into words, I was a little surprised when I saw them. Saitou Takashi didn't wear his trademark fox mask from the very beginning—he wasn't even holding it in his hand. It exposed his features—the ones that looked a lot like Aikawa-san's.

Then, looking at Magokoro—her hair color that had once looked like the color of rust had splendidly reverted back to the shiny orange that it was before.

Orange, twine-like braids.

Her once dirt-stained body was now spotless, as if the scene I had observed at the Kitano Tenmangu two days back had been an illusion all along.

Black shorts and a black, tight shirt.

Barefoot.

It was almost identical—completely like a recreation of that scene.

Like—

Like when I was reunited with Magokoro here.

Except for one thing. The black circles under her eyes still remained. They hadn't disappeared—perhaps that indicated that Magokoro hadn't slept since then.

That reminds me—

At that time, Magokoro had easily beaten Moeta-kun, Houko-chan, and Izumu-kun—three *Killing Names*, while half asleep.

Still bound by the chains.

Using less than half of her power.

And, the person who awakened Magokoro for an instant—was now standing in front of her. Humanity's Strongest Contractor—Overkill Red, Aikawa Jun.

Of course—

Needless to say, I hadn't forgotten that Aikawa Jun was struck down with a single blow from Magokoro, who wasn't even using half of her power.

I hadn't forgotten—

However, seeing Aikawa-san stand in front of Magokoro with a victorious smile, it almost felt as if that scene had never occurred in the first place at all.

On the other hand, Magokoro was expressionless.

Maybe because of the bags under her eyes, her expression looked even worse than usual—she was just quizzically staring at Aikawa-san. No, that reminds me—at that time, when Magokoro was stepping on Aikawa-san, she had an expression like she couldn't quite accept it, didn't she?

The fox-masked man—

Was looking at these two, seeming extremely bored.

Looking at his own daughter and granddaughter.

In a state like that—

Only the passage of time ensued.

In the deep night, when the grass and trees had fallen asleep.

Without a single sound.

Almost as if—everyone had forgotten why they came here in the first place.

I wonder if they were feeling it.

That, regardless of the conclusion—something critical would be decided here—did everyone share that feeling?

At least I did.

Unsigned hidden under my jacket.

The gun, inserted in the back of my jeans.

The anti lock blade—I didn't need it anymore.

"Hm."

Eventually—

Finally, the fox-masked man spoke.

With a voice so small Aikawa-san and Magokoro couldn't hear—he said to me.

"Now—there should be no problem with the situation, right my enemy?"

"...Yes"

"Alright."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to confirm just in case—however, my enemy," The fox-masked man said. "Last time, my daughter survived—only because she was lucky. You know that, right?"

"..."

"The battle will continue until any one of them is unable to fight anymore—after that, the connection that existed between you and me will end. Hm. When I think about our connection being severed, it feels refreshing."

"Well said."

Unable to fight—

In fact, that was exact.

We came all this way.

So we probably wouldn't stop now.

Nonstop, until we reached the last station.

There wasn't anyone here who could stop that.

Last time, Izumu-kun had kind of stopped Magokoro—but now, without Kino-san, Rurero-san or Jikoku-san, once started, it would be unstoppable.

Neither me nor the fox-masked man.

Neither one of us had the power.

The Weakest and the Worst—couldn’t stop the Strongest and Last.

Suddenly, a concern appeared in my heart.

The same concern as usual.

Though the same as usual, with even more attachment than usual.

Wouldn't I have made it in time now?

Would I still—have been able to stop it?

If I didn't want to see.

If I didn't want to take responsibility.

I could just run away like usual.

"What’s wrong?"

The fox-masked man asked.

"If you want to stop them—I'll help, you know?"

"—Certainly not."

I answered.

As if trying to erase all the concerns I had.

"Rather—please don't forget the promise."

After saying this, as if declaring war—

I closed my mouth and looked forward.

The senses of Aikawa-san and Magokoro were out of the norm. No matter how quietly we spoke, there was always a possibility for them to overhear our conversation.

I wanted—to avoid that.

I mustn't let that influence them.

I shouldn't mix impurities.

I shouldn't mix unnecessary things.

Wrong.

This was definitely not a battle for my sake, nor for the fox-faced man's sake, nor for the world's sake, nor for the story's sake.

This was—

A battle for Magokoro's sake.

A battle for Magokoro's sake, and—

"...Yo"

Then—

Magokoro, spoke.

Her voice was no longer hoarse.

It changed back—to her usual voice.

"Are you—that, my **ingredient**?"

Of course, the person Magokoro was talking to was—

The one in front of her, Aikawa Jun.

There was only her.

"Though it's faint—I don't remember it, but I remember it. I—punched you a lil bit."

"..."

Aikawa didn't answer.

She answered Magokoro with an unresponsive silence.

"To tell the truth, I don't really get it—why do I have to fight an outdated version like you at this point? I let myself get enticed by Ii-chan's logic, but I don't think any of this has meaning. I have long surpassed the likes of you—"

Magokoro glared at Aikawa-san—and said that with plenty of hatred.

"However, even then—I still don't like you. Completely displeasing. After all—if you never existed, I wouldn't have had to exist. Yeah, I'll be honest—I despise you. Overkill Red Overkill Red Overkill Red Overkill Red! That name, I heard it countless times at the ER3. Can you imagine how irritating that was?"

"..."

"Why did I have to suffer that kind of treatment—for the sake of an incomplete product like you? If only you had been more proper, something like me wouldn't have had to be born. Because of being born in this world—can you understand how much boredom I had to go through, can you imagine it?"

Magokoro—

Spit her words, as if cursing.

Like she stopped chaining herself.

Like she stopped oppressing herself.

As if—venting out at her.

As if putting all blame on her.

As if blaming her grudge on her.

As if achieving her vengeance.

Overlapping words with words and words.

"And it's not just me—apart from me, how many people do you think were sacrificed? My case was still fine—because I still had Ii-chan. I had a sliver of salvation. However, there were five thousand more people who didn't even get my level of salvation. All of them—suffered because of you and died because of you. All of it—was because you—you...weren't proper."

What hurt Magokoro's chest the most—was that point.

No matter what kind of treatment she received,

No matter how much suffering she tasted,

The fact that herself wasn't even at the bottom of the barrel.

Therefore—the Orange Seed.

Magokoro, who was called that.

Towards Aikawa-san—

"I can't forgive you."

"..."

Aikawa-san—still hadn't spoken anything.

Still, nothing.

As if she was spoiling Magokoro—she took in her words.

Silently.

Her expression—became a shadow. I couldn't see it.

"I'm sort of your **sequel**—and I surpassed you in all kinds of domains. However, even then—the guys from the ER3 repeated 'Not enough', 'Not enough', and blamed me. As a result of that—I died once. Engulfed by flames—I died."

Died.

Died.

I died.

Magokoro said.

She hadn't—forgotten.

There was no way she could forget.

The moment she died.

"I have no memory of being born—I have no idea why I was born. This world is much too simple, and much too empty. For me, whether this world exists or not, it's the same. Presence and absence are equal in value. Even if that world just hadn't yet started—I wouldn't care at all."

That was the first time—

The first time I saw Magokoro talking this much.

In the first place—

Magokoro wasn't really the talkative type.

With how many—

With just how many feelings—

Was she now facing Aikawa Jun?

It wasn’t because I deceived her into this.

It wasn’t—because I wheedled her into this.

That was of her own will.

Magokoro's—true thoughts.

Magokoro.

Just that.

"Try to say something—outdated. You must have something to tell me, don't you?! Why did I—why did I have to go through all of that!? Why is it that I'm living right now, tell me! No, not that—tell me if I'm even living!"

"...Hahn."

There.

Aikawa-san sighed.

Towards Magokoro—deeply, she sighed.

Looking extremely bothered, scratching her head.

Then—

She looked at Magokoro.

"I don't really care, but you know...isn't referring to yourself as 'ore-sama' in this day and age quite out of fashion?"

"...!"

"Stop babbling about all this shit, you—do you think spouting annoying gloomy stuff will get you some pity?! My fault? As if I care. Are you stupid?"

Aikawa-san—

Said in an extremely malicious way.

"If you're bored of living, I'll properly kill ya. So come at me, ore-sama-chan."

"—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!"

That was—the spark.

Magokoro started moving.

Like on that day.

Exactly like—that time.

The next thing I noticed—before I could notice, she had already jumped in front of Aikawa-san, binding both hands in a fist raised above her head.

She—swung down her fist.

It burst on Aikawa-san's cranium.

However, this time, unlike last time, she should have been able to dodge it—last time, it was when Aikawa-san moved to attack that she got cleanly hit by Magokoro's fist in a counter.

This time—Aikawa-san should have been ready to receive it.

She shouldn't have been hit twice by the same attack.

However—

Even then, that attack landed.

Jolting—Aikawa-san's head.

"...!"

With a jolt.

On the verge of collapsing—

On the verge of collapsing, Aikawa-san stopped her fall by taking a step.

With her legs spread wide like a crab.

She held on.

"**Now—we're even**."

Aikawa-san—said that, and smiled.

Looking at Magokoro, she smiled.

"Well then—ready, action!"

With her legs still open—she twisted only her upper body, she launched a palm heel attack towards Magokoro's stomach which was still in the air.

Even Magokoro had no way to brace herself in the air, so like that, she was pushed back to her original position—however, while being pushed back, she skilfully spun in the air—and ended up landing cleanly and beautifully on both her bare feet. If you move in the same fashion as a cat, revolving in the air isn't impossible—therefore, it's not a surprise for Magokoro to be able to do it, however—

Unrelated to that.

Unrelated to that, to my surprise.

Although she staggered one more time, after redressing her posture Aikawa-san—showed no sign of damage.

She smiled—fearlessly.

"...How...even though it's the second time, unlike last time, Magokoro shouldn't be under a spell anymore—"

"Hm."

The fox-masked man lightly snickered.

"Well...that should be about right."

"Eh?"

"Don't worry and just look—it'll get interesting now."

The fox-masked man indicated to me to look ahead with a motion of the jaw. I returned my gaze there—by that time, Magokoro wasn't in the same place.

This time, she didn't jump.

Brandishing one arm—her left arm, with all her might—she rushed towards Aikawa-san, as if ramming against her.

That was—Izumu-kun's *Eating One*!

An impossible to evade attack of absolute destructive power—

"Kukukuh—as I said, the damage and appearance are flashy, but precisely because of that, it's too futile—weren't you the one to break through that technique, Magokoro?"

The fox-masked man laughed evilly.

As if he was having fun.

Aikawa-san didn't seem to be ready to take the hit this time, she rushed in on the straight line Magokoro was charging on—then, she spun her body backwards, and as a result of Aikawa-san heading in the wrong direction, the timing of the attack was somewhat off, so she hit the interior part of her elbow—of her own elbow.

Thump.

Magokoro's *Eating One* bent in a strange direction, a direction so off you might think she was aiming in the wrong spot—and swung in the air.

"Guh, uuuuh—!"

Magokoro—

She raised a voice twisted in pain.

"Aah..." Then, the fox-masked man said. "So you can cancel it like that... I see. Yeah, because, after all, it's just a joint. It's easy to twist in the direction it's supposed to. Doing that, the energy you lost will rampage in your body, huh?"

"..."

What...?

This person, was he calmly doing play-by-play commentary?

Even though, if Magokoro lost—

He would die.

"Guh... Ooooooooooh!"

However, naturally, Magokoro wouldn't get disheartened with just that—

This time she extended both arms.

An *Eating One* from both hands!

Feasting!

Then—she couldn't avoid it like earlier.

If she couldn't—

However, even then, you can't deny its huge drawbacks. Aikawa-san extended both her beautiful legs in a high kick—however, that wasn't intended as an attack. She kicked Magokoro's left collar with her toes—

And jumped backwards.

Of course, there was no way Magokoro's arms would be longer than Aikawa-san's legs. In the first place, *Eating One* was able to settle in as Izumu-kun's sure-hit kill technique because of his abnormally long arms.

Both *Eating One* only swung down on air.

Because of all the momentum, Magokoro lost her balance.

Then, Aikawa-san jumped back into Magokoro's personal space—and again, twisting her upper body, she did the same palm heel attack as before, as if replaying the same scene, though with both hands this time.

Just looking at it—

Just looking at it made me feel like my organs were being twisted.

Tap, tap, tap.

Magokoro, carried by the momentum—retreated three steps.

"Kah... Ahah...!"

"Hey, hey, ore-sama-chan—what happened? Is that orange hair a decoration? Are those orange eyes just marbles? Hahah—or is it that, in the end, orange can’t beat red-"

"...SHUT UP! Don't talk so arrogantly, outdated!"

Magokoro—

Didn't wait for her damage to recover, and stepped in up to Aikawa-san with her posture still low—and launched a direct strike.

Just a strike.

However—that was the fist which had killed Izumu-kun.

In pure destructive power, it rivaled *Eating One* and surpassed it—Omokage Magokoro, the Orange Seed's strike.

Aikawa-san, however, didn't try to avoid it. Without avoiding it, she—made the same strike, as if giving a refund.

An exchange.

As a result—

Magokoro's fist didn't reach Aikawa-san.

Aikawa-san's fist reached Magokoro's cheek.

The gap—in reach.

An overwhelming gap in reach.

Adult and child—

No, even bigger in terms of stature.

Due to Newton's third law, all the momentum behind Magokoro's fist returned to her. That damage was inimaginable.

Although inimaginable, without paying it much mind—stepping even more in, Magokoro's other hand headed towards the open Aikawa-san in a semi-hook-straight form.

But, Aikawa-san only retreated her legs a little.

With that—she didn't reach anymore.

Even after stepping in more, she didn't reach.

Aikawa-san's previous kick landed on the solar plexus.

She precisely aimed for a vital spot.

Even Humanity's Last—even if she could control her heart's movement at will, she couldn't control the position of her vital spots. If her solar plexus was hit, her body would receive appropriate damage.

"Ugh—Ooooooooooooooooh!"

Magokoro—roared with all her might.

Then, from here on, it became a slugfest.

There was no sign of it ending with one strike. They just unleashed a continuous stream of hits in order to make the opponent flinch—

Using strikes and kicks, rampaging with both fists and legs—

Without any regard for defense.

Neither one of them were thinking of protecting themselves.

A slugfest—

No, it eventually became a mudslinging fight with the numbers of attacks piling up.

"..."

It left me—speechless.

Did I instigate something absurd—as expected, the usual regret pressed in further. The terrible feeling of regret from having lighted the spark to the critical battle deciding the end of the world—pressed in further.

The fox-masked man glanced at me from the side.

With an expression—not letting on anything special.

He could seem as if he was having fun—

And inversely, he could look very bored.

"...Hm."

It's not like he noticed my gaze—but the fox-masked man reformed his sitting position.

"When it comes to this kind of battle—my daughter has the advantage over my granddaughter."

"Eh..."

Thinking about it—he was right.

Because it was a contest on a level so high I couldn't fathom spreading before me, I couldn't follow each and every blow's direction—however, even then, when I tried to properly look at it, it was evident.

Thinking about it, it was natural.

The length of her limbs—

Her legs were about twice as long.

If Magokoro wanted to land a strike, she had to be considerably close to Aikawa-san. On the other hand, regardless of how easy it was for Magokoro to get into Aikawa-san's close range, Aikawa-san didn't let her make that distance.

The difference in body size wasn't simply a difference in strength.

Magokoro blew away Moeta-kun with just her arms and managed to open Izumu-kun's stomach—

But.

Even then—

There was nothing she could do about her absolute shortness.

Only that factor—wouldn't change.

No matter how much power Magokoro's attacks held, it didn't mean anything if they didn’t land—no matter how fast Magokoro's attacks were, that didn't mean anything if they didn't reach their destination-

At most, the airflow generated would sway Aikawa-san's clothes.

She was far from reaching Aikawa-san’s neck—at most, she could touch her clothes.

Of course...

That went for Aikawa-san's attacks too. Since she had to continuously dodge Magokoro's attacks, she couldn't put much power behind her own—you could say it was close to restraining herself.

Not a decisive blow.

Magokoro's ability to get hit, in other words, the endurance of Magokoro's body was, as all her other parameters, off the charts—that impregnable wall wouldn't fall.

However...

From looking at the current situation.

No matter how you looked at it—Aikawa-san had the advantage.

Aikawa Jun surpassed Omokage Magokoro.

"...Why? Before—when they fought before, it was such a one-sided massacre, so how..."

Was it true that Aikawa-san was careless at that time? Having Magokoro in front of her—seeing her own successor, was she at a loss? Of course that was a strike close to a surprise attack.

However—

What I felt at that time in the spectator seat, as an observer, that overwhelming decisiveness, I—couldn't feel it.

I couldn't feel that unsurmountable wall.

I wonder why.

Even though Magokoro was now—completely released.

"Oi oi—" The fox-masked man said with a forced smile. "That's natural, my enemy. Get yourself together. Didn't you set up this burlesque theatre scene because you thought that my daughter would put up a good fight against my granddaughter?"

"Of-of course, but—but."

"It's simple."

The fox-masked man said.

As if it was really a simple and obvious thing.

"My daughter was still—restraining and binding herself with a spell—isn't it just that?"

I can't really exert my full strength.

At some point—Aikawa-san told me so.

In that sense, even as the Strongest—

The existence at the summit is boring.

Therefore—

She relied on me.

Then, in this situation—I answered Aikawa-san's expectations straight on, was that what it meant?

However, even if that was true—

Aikawa-san was still the one—

Who knew Magokoro's state of mind the best.

She knew the emotion of not feeling alive—the emotion of wondering whether you're alive or not.

"..."

Then—why was it?

Why was Aikawa-san—

Always and always and always...

Smiling so much?

Why did she get angry at every little thing?

She became mad at boring things.

Amused herself with trivial things.

As if the world—was her playground.

Even myself—

Even something like my existence, even something like my deviance that was shirked by Teruko-san, Muimi-chan, Kazuhito-san and everyone else—

Why was she able to accept it?

To be able—

To get along with this world?

What was different?

Between Aikawa-san and Magokoro—

Between Aikawa-san and me, what was different?

"Tgh—"

Magokoro's body—harshly flew backwards.

The palm heel hit her lungs this time.

Not breathing for some time was nothing for Magokoro, but apparently it was sufficient to make her retreat back with just the inertia of the hit.

Then, one more palm strike—she jumped.

No...

This one, did she jump back on her own?

That was what Magokoro didn't show even in the previous fight—a defensive move.

A move done just to dodge.

Maybe that was why Magokoro was shaken on the inside. The moment she landed, there was a faint but long enough gap that even I could notice.

Without fail, Aikawa-san used that—at least, she could have. However, instead—she released the alertness of her palm striker. "Hm," she completely abandoned any posture.

While Magokoro was correcting her posture with a puzzled look—

"—Mmh."

And.

Aikawa-san said, dissatisfied.

"For some reason—I can't laugh."

"...Ah?"

"It's not quite fun—it's like I'm shaving to death someone constantly on the defensive. I can't seem to laugh... This gap in reach feels a bit too *cowardly*—so I can't laugh."

Saying that—

Aikawa-san heavily lowered her body, bending her knees to a near right angle—her long arms too, she folded them so that her hands reached her chest and took a pose like a praying mantis.

Her point of view—was on the same level as Magokoro's.

They glared at each other—stronger than ever.

"Mm... Err, a bit more—right, like that. Now I can—laugh a little."

"What—are you doing?"

"Didn't I say I'd adjust my limbs and height to your level, ore-sama-chan—though doing it with my bust would be impossible."

"...!"

Magokoro—

Would get angry, I thought.

Would face Aikawa-san with anger, I thought.

Would let anger control her attacks, I thought.

However—

"Hah—ahahah."

She—laughed.

"Kukukuh."

Aikawa-san simultaneously laughed.

"Fufufu—"

"Hahahahah—"

"Hihihih—"

"Gerageragerage—"

Ra!

Magokoro jumped.

Not with anger dominating her.

At that time, there was no way for me to know what led her—however, at least, she didn't move with anger, hatred, or any sensitive emotion easily categorized as negative or positive—

Magokoro jumped at Aikawa-san.

Now the strategy of not letting her approach in a range where she could attack couldn't be used—no, strictly speaking, she could use it if she felt like it—but Aikawa-san chose a way where she wouldn't.

That was always the case—

That person.

She couldn’t stand it if she didn't stand on the same level as others.

That was certainly a handicap brought about by her being the Strongest—however, she should know that such kind thoughts were absolutely unnecessary for Magokoro.

Even then, she leveled the ground.

She made the opponent and herself—equals.

A fair and square chivalry spirit.

That wasn't kindness.

She wasn't trying to win with only her outstanding parts.

She was trying to win with her everything.

Therefore—the Strongest.

Aikawa-san avoided Magokoro's fist by bending her body. She opened her posture to avoid that straight attack and used the twisting motion to spring forth her own. Even though there was no fist to speak of, Magokoro's posture broke again.

Looking at it, I started to slowly get it—

Although Magokoro completely controlled her own strength, her own talent—the way she used it was too straightforward. They were straight attacks without any twist—as if she wasn't twisted.

That was also the case for Aikawa-san, but—

But, how should I put it... She was adjusting to her opponent.

Her way of moving had no freedom.

"From way back—"

The fox-masked man said.

"From way back, the stronger her opponents—the more my daughter got fired up. This much—is just natural."

"..."

"Last time ended so brutally, it was a bit of a letdown—but I guess she's doing her best for an old model. However-"

Crack—

An unpleasant sound—echoed throughout the gymnasium.

Looking in that direction—

Aikawa-san was holding her left shoulder and taking distance away from Magokoro.

Did she—dislocate it?

It seems she couldn't avoid Magokoro's fist, which had hit. It was just dislocated, so she probably didn't take it from the front. It looked like it'd just grazed her—however, that much power from just being grazed.

As I thought—

She was fundamentally an order of magnitude higher.

Even then, Aikawa-san—

"Ahahahah—now it’s getting fun."

She laughed.

Continued to laugh.

Really, from the bottom of her heart, with much fun.

"What about you—is it fun, ore-sama-chan?"

"..."

Magokoro—was still glaring at Aikawa-san with sanpaku eyes. However, her lips warped into a malicious grin,

"Not—bad."

She said.

Clink, Aikawa-san relodged her bone as if she was experienced in the matter.

Magokoro didn't try to make use of that gap. Rather, she waited for Aikawa-san to ready herself—then, she approached Aikawa-san using her footwork again, though slowly this time.

Aikawa-san lowered her hips—folded her limbs, adjusted her eye level to Magokoro and engaged in the fight.

An exchange of offense and defense—started.

Both offense.

And defense.

Mixed in—exchanging blows intricately.

Pleasant sounds.

Sounds so rough they were pleasant—resonated through the air.

These sounds—

How did they sound to Magokoro?

Neither of them were unhurt.

Losing blood here and there.

Even some teeth might’ve been broken.

Bones too—maybe one or two.

Their clothes turned into shambles during the fight.

Even then—the offense and defense showed no sign of slowing down.

Rather, it only became fiercer.

They were laughing.

Both of them—were laughing.

I didn't understand what they were doing.

It was as if—they were dancing.

Like an elegant dance.

Sweat scattered.

Splashes of blood flew.

For every attack—blood was spurted out.

That was such—

Such a beautiful—magnificent sight.

I couldn't resist—being enticed.

I couldn't resist—being overwhelmed.

"Hm—yo, my enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"Now that it’s come to this, boring developments will probably continue to unfold—how about it, want to go outside and talk for a bit?"

"Eh... But."

To avert his eyes—from this exchange.

To avert his eyes from this exchange, which seemed like it could last an eternity but would end in an instant, decide fate in an instant, even if it was the fox-masked man—I couldn't think him sane.

Boring...

Did he call this exchange that?

After all this—this man.

I instinctively, by reflex, looked at the fox-masked man with a puzzled face... However he quietly—smiled.

With a face like Aikawa-san's, a smile like Aikawa-san's.

"Don't worry—neither of them will lose that easily. You could say this is a battle between a spear able to pierce any shield and a spear able to pierce any shield—there's no contradiction, so reaching a conclusion won't be easy."

"But...isn't Aikawa-san—"

"Yeah. It's true that up to now, I've seen many scenes where my daughter got defeated by *enemies*, countless times even—to the point she had more losses than wins in front of me. That's not a lie. But you see, my enemy. You can't forget. Unlike me or you, they're main characters to the core."

The fox-masked man said.

"From way back—she has never lost a second time to someone who defeated her once."

2

Descending down the stairs adjacent to the stage, going outside through the waiting room—we came out behind the gymnasium. The opposite way from where we came in at the end of September. At that time, Houko-chan and Izumu-kun were with us—but now, only the fox-masked man and I were here.

The sound of Magokoro and Aikawa-san battling—

Could be heard even from outside the gymnasium.

Considering the facility, they must have properly soundproofed it—but it felt like even the heat and splashes of blood were still able to reach us.

The fox-masked man—

"Hm."

Said that, then stood at a small distance from the gymnasium.

Standing as if he didn't care about me.

That was a little annoying, so I moved to a place where I would enter the fox-masked man's line of sight. As if staring at him.

The moon—

The moon in the shape of a zero could be seen behind the fox-masked man's back.

His kimono’s silhouette was abnormal as well.

He somehow looked—ethereal.

The sound of the ruthless slugfest didn't add to that, but—if he was wearing that fox mask, he might have exerted an ominous ghost-like aura.

"What happened—to the fox mask?"

"I offered it to the dead."

"So that was the preparation you were talking about."

"After all, that was originally something akin to Akira's memento—though it seems my daughter didn't know. Had she known, she wouldn't have spent ten years searching for me. No—since we were both dead, it

wouldn't have been that simple either, I guess. If you weren't there—me and my daughter would have probably never met."

"...What did you want to talk about?"

I said.

"At this point, we have nothing left to talk about, do we?"

"That's right, but you know—in one hour, one of us will depart from this world. I've already died once, so I'm not that afraid of death—but how about you?"

"Me...too. It's like I died," I said. "Though now I finally think that, if I could redo it—I would want that."

"Hoh."

"Aren't you thinking about that, Mr. Fox?"

"The only thing I wish for is the end of the world."

"...Since that first step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, that Kajou Akira person, died inside you—and you decided to disband the *Thirteen Stairs* alongside that—I thought you might have lost interest in the end of the world, but is that not the case?"

"..."

"Even if that was merely in the past—you called the *end of the world* where Jikoku-san *released* Magokoro 'worthless'—in the end, what did that mean?"

"It had no meaning. I just said it was worthless because it was—there was no additional meaning. Don't distrust me. Each and every word I say—it's all rubbish. Taking me seriously would make you look like an idiot."

"Well that's probably true—parting in that way with the *Thirteen Stairs* that accompanied you through the final moments, Konomi-san, Rurero-san, and—Emoto-san. Also Misora-chan and Takami-chan, I think you must be crazy. These girls look the most like idiots among us all."

"What, was there a woman to your liking among them—then you can take her. I don't mind you having my hand-me-downs. The original shape

of the *Thirteen Stairs* was only maintained because of Akira—now, without him, whether it existed or not—it’s the same."

"Why did that Akira-san die?"

"..."

"Is it—my fault?"

"Maybe."

The fox-masked man said.

"To be more accurate—it's this situation's fault."

"This...situation?"

"Hm," The fox-masked said in a bored tone, "By the way, my enemy—there are two points I want to confirm with you. Is that fine?"

"Why not...I don't mind."

"*Unsigned*. Did you bring it here?"

"That's—just in case, yes."

"That's good. When I heard Magokoro had collapsed the apartment, I feared it might have been destroyed together with it."

"I had just taken out the minimum amount of baggage—so I was lucky."

Unsigned.

The anti-lock blade.

And—the gun.

"Yeah. Even if it's *Unsigned*, it's just a piece of metal in front of Magokoro. I'm relieved."

"...Originally it was Furuyari Zukin-san—the eleventh Furuyari Zukin-san's exchange material, right?"

"Exactly."

Although Emoto-san's *betrayal* was kept a secret, Zukin-chan's *betrayal* couldn't be hidden due to Misora-chan and Takami-chan's presence and Konomi-san's testimonial—so the fox-masked man ended up learning. Although even after learning, he didn't blame Zukin-chan's *betrayal*, nor did he blame Misora-chan and Takami-chan's independent actions. According to Konomi-san, it was something he knew from the start, or

rather, something he was expecting—so naturally, Konomi-san wasn't criticized either. A whim of that level is plenty in the realm of normality, so he didn't especially pay it any mind-

"Err—about something that happened during your talk with Rurero-san..."

"Aah... At the time, you were under the bed like Axeman, right my enemy?"

"Axeman is nice. At that time, you evaluated Zukin-chan quite highly, but what was that about in the end? To me Zukin-chan was just a normal highschool girl."

"Aah... That, now it doesn't matter one speck—rather than appointing her to a step, that was more for custody. There aren't that many of her type. Precisely as you said yourself—the *normal* type, I rarely encounter them around me."

"..."

"You don't either, right? That kind of *normal*. That kind of resource is precious. I didn't think Rurero could ever understand the feeling of yearning for *normalcy*, therefore I purposely made fun of her—but I certainly wanted at least one at my side."

Well, I guess she died immediately, though.

The fox-masked man said.

What came to mind—was the case in May.

My classmates—normal people.

Normal humans.

Emoto Tomoe.

Aoii Mikoko.

Atemiya Muimi.

Usami Akiharu.

Immediately after getting involved with me—there were casualties.

And ultimately—

It was like everyone died.

I wonder if it was similar to that.

"I'm sure that's what you and I are lacking the most—characters possessing the attribute of *normalcy*. Because we don't have that, because we lack that—we're forced to exert useless efforts. I thought she would accomplish an extremely important role in achieving the *end of the world*—but I shouldn't have made her join the *Thirteen Stairs*. Well, regarding that girl, *Unsigned* was just an aside—*Unsigned* only held meaning for the eleventh, after all."

"...If you want it back, I'll give it to you."

"It's fine. It's not mine, after all—want to hear its story?"

"If it's a short one."

"It's short. Short, simple, and tasteless. That blade was a memento of that old man's past lover. That lover was a blacksmith too, and apparently not too skilled of an artisan, but that *Unsigned* was the only creation she accomplished by miracle. And similarly to the anti-lock blade that passed from Zerozaki Hitoshiki to Aikawa Jun to Ishimaru Kouta and eventually to you, it was in my daughter's possession."

Of course, that too—

Was unbeknownst to my daughter.

The fox-masked man said.

Aah—I see.

So that was why Zukin-chan didn't want to talk about it.

That was certainly a private matter—and in reality, like the fox-masked man just said, it was a tasteless, simple and short story.

Then—

"Then, Mr. Fox."

I said.

"If I survive, I'll bring it to the eleventh's grave—so if you survive, please do the same."

"..."

"If we don't—I would feel too bad for Zukin-chan."

It's like she—got swallowed up.

One step lower than the other *Thirteen Stairs* or the other people around me... That high level common girl got involved—

Because of the fox-masked man's selfishness.

And because of my own selfishness.

Therefore,

At minimum—I want to do that for her.

"There's no—meaning behind it, you know."

"I don't mind."

"Whether we do it or not—it's the same."

"I know."

"...Then, it's fine. I got it," The fox-masked man agreed. "That should be—a firm promise. I have a principle of only promising things I can do."

"Thank you very much."

Although I said that—

At this point, I wondered if the fox-masked man brought up the subject of *Unsigned* because of that, and I realized. He only reacted that way because he didn't expect me to make the proposition. If I hadn't, wouldn't he have brought it up himself?

I think that view was too close to lip service and too self-serving, but it wasn't just lip service—I felt in the fox-masked man's voice a duty to accomplish every little task he had left to do.

What could—that mean?

It was as if, it's like he was—preparing to die.

"The second thing you wanted to check—what is it?"

"Aah... No, you don't need to get so tense about that. It's truly just a verification. About the rules of the current situation."

"Eh?"

"If Magokoro wins, it's my win and I'll kill you—if my daughter wins, it's your win and you'll kill me. Right?"

"Yes—but what about it?"

"In case of a draw, what shall we do?"

The fox-masked man said.

"In case of an ex aequo, of double knockdown—or perhaps if both die, what to do... I just thought we hadn't decided."

"Aah—now that you mention it, we didn't."

"I don't think anyone would be satisfied without anyone winning at this point—however, we can’t really bring it up after the fight. What should we do?"

"Is it fine for me to decide?"

"Weren't you the one to bring this bet?"

"...Right."

I thought for a moment, then answered.

"In case of a draw, let's both die."

"...That's quite excessive. Are you fine with that?"

"Yes—originally, I didn't propose this bet in order to kill you. Between you and me—from the start, I was content as long as one of us died."

"..."

Just by one dying—

Even then, that's half of two people, so—

"So—for the draw, both of us dying would be the correct choice for this match."

"'The correct choice for this match'. Hm. In other words—" The fox-masked man said. "From the start—you had no possibility of losing, huh. If you or me—one of us, or even both of us—died, you would win."

"You're right—"

I said.

"—That's also true for Zukin-chan's case, but...we're too much of a nuisance. Both me and you. It would be fine if we were simply exceeding, like Aikawa-san or Magokoro—but although we can't reach them, you and me—we make our surroundings go crazy."

"Therefore, we should die. That's quite the pragmatic decision."

"I thought a lot about it before arriving at it though."

"You—so that's the reason you bet on my daughter?" He said. "So you—made the bet being prepared to die."

"No...that's wrong. My objective was to save Magokoro first and foremost. I used Magokoro as an excuse—so I need Aikawa-san to win or I'll be in a bind."

"But, weren't you surprised about my daughter progressing through the fight with preponderance?"

"After all, I had no grounds. It was surprising to me that everything seemed to go so well."

Then, I replied with a question.

"But if we're going there—what about you? What about you? If you had the data that Aikawa-san had never lost against anyone twice—shouldn't you have been the one to bet on your daughter?"

"..."

"Were you—intending to lose?"

"Certainly not," the fox-masked man smiled. "I still haven't seen the end of the world—the end of the Story."

"Then—why?"

"Because there is a gap in strength huge enough to overwrite this data. Therefore—honestly, I can't read the rest of this fight. Though in a short fight, Magokoro would undoubtedly win."

"..."

I see...

I got it.

I finally got it.

This person—he chose randomly.

When he was forced to pick between Magokoro and Aikawa-san, he probably randomly—picked Magokoro because of something like 'she won last time', without thinking anything.

Either way—it was the same.

Like for me.

I see, so that's what it was—

Being killed by me in this situation—

For the fox-masked man, it was the end of the world.

No...

Then wouldn't that way of thinking be too straightforward?

No matter what, wouldn't that be too simplistic?

There should have been other ways to reach this point. Also, the fox-masked man's will had nearly no influence on the current situation—how much of it did he see, literally—as us being swept by destiny?

As being swept away by the situation.

He said—'It's this situation's fault.'

Where was—the will in those words?

"For a bit—at the end, for a bit, let me tell you a ridiculous story—my enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"Ten years ago—me, Junya, Akira, and my daughter—each of us confronted and killed each other for our own reasons—that looked a lot like this situation."

"This—situation?"

"**They're different but alike**—I wonder how. Like that Demonic Killer, Zerozaki Hitoshiki and you."

Izumu-kun didn't admit it, but—

Zerozaki and I were two sides of the same coin.

As if we were totally different—

But by contrast, very similar.

The same.

As if put in front of a mirror—

As if we were the mirror of each other.

Continuing indefinitely to no end, similar figures.

"As you already know to an unpleasant degree, what was used at that time was the one currently known as Aikawa Jun—the existence who collapsed causality. Because of that, I ended up exiled from causality."

"Yes—I’ve already heard that many times."

"At that time—my daughter was *released*. And that *release* was something she did on her own. My daughter succeeded in leaving her lock open."

"...That's..."

"At first, I thought that was the end of the world. An existence able to collapse all of causality and collapse all of destiny—I believed that was the Dying Epilogue. But it wasn't. Just having collapsed causality—that was immediately fixed and the bothers were cleaned up."

"..."

"Then—after that, I tried again countless times. I created the *Thirteen Stairs*, came in contact with various people, and tested every experiment I could think of. Then—I arrived at you."

The fox-masked man pointed at me.

"I met you, my enemy."

"...I—"

"However, at the end of that, I lost all my *limbs*—and I gained nothing."

"There's no way you didn't gain anything."

"There is. After all—the circumstances I finally arrived at after doing everything I could—

Were the same as ten years ago.

Then—no matter how much I struggle, that means I can only arrive **here**."

Back Nozzle.

Jail Alternative.

All of it—he said it himself.

I see... That's...ridiculous.

A much too—ridiculous punchline.

After causing so much trouble to others, after not caring about both enemies and allies, after involving many people—for that to be the conclusion... It's too cruel.

Not something that should be allowed.

"I have no intention to die. Until I see the end of the world. Until I see this world, this helplessly interesting world through to its end, I can't possibly die. I can't possibly die when I still have so many things I want to know. As if I'd die before I could stand before the end of the world. However, then—my enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"How much longer will I have to continue living?"

"..."

"Having already—died."

He wasn't wearing a mask anymore, but—

I couldn't read the emotion on his face.

It was like everything—had gone extinct.

Kuchiha-chan.

He was in the same condition as—Madoka Kuchiha.

An undying girl.

Because she didn’t live—the girl wouldn't die.

Of course, it wasn’t like the fox-masked man had a peculiar essence like that girl—his body aged, his existence continued, and eventually he would rot away.

However...

On the aspect of not living, they were similar.

Also similar to—Magokoro.

They didn't feel like they were living.

I was reminded of Aikawa-san's words from the day before—'To be alive is to think you are alive.' Zerozaki's words too, doubled on that. If for Saitou Takashi, his raison d'être was only to observe the end of the world, to know the end of the whole world—

Right.

Ten years ago, even if he hadn't died—

It was like he had never been alive at all.

Aah...so it was **that**.

So it was **that**.

Then—it was more than despair.

Aikawa-san or Magokoro.

He didn't choose randomly, he just didn't choose.

Either one was fine.

The fox-masked man—was fine with either winning.

He was fine with betting on anyone.

Like me—this man had no way of losing.

I mean—for the fox-masked man not even living—both living and dying...really **were fine either way**—

Like—me.

We were the same.

Be it one person—or two people's half.

Me thinking that everything was fine as long as either me or Saitou Takashi died, and Saitou Takashi not caring whether he died or lived in the end—it was like we were the same.

What—

What kind of enemies were we?

"Enemies, huh?"

The fox-masked man said.

"For the first time—it feels like you truly, with your own will, from your heart, admitted to us being enemies."

"...That might...be true—but."

I—

Paused my words for a little, then said.

"I went to a certain island. An island where geniuses gathered. There—there was one murderer. I wasn't—in her sight. For her, I was merely a genius' belonging, merely an uncertain element, and merely part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I met a few college students. One said she liked me, one understood me, one hated me, and there was another one—but his interest was only in the other three. Not himself, just the other three. In the end, those four only created a permutation combination and finally became whole. I was only an uncertain element, and part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I barged into a school. It was in order to save a trapped girl. But that girl wasn't yearning for my help, and she wasn't even trapped. For her and even for the side that captured her, I was part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I arrived at a certain research facility. The researcher ruling it was, you could say, a loser. But that loser had high aims. He didn't bat an eye for me. For him, and for the people at this facility, I was merely an uncertain element, and part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I got hired by an assistant professor. She employed an undying girl and worked towards a study of not dying. What she was yearning for was the back of her mighty master—and she really didn't care about me. For her, I was merely an uncertain element, and part of the predestined—"

Harmony.

Then—

"You were the only one."

I said.

"You were the only one—to call me your enemy."

"..."

"Valuing me, and only me, for my own worth. There was no end to the troubles and the enormous damage that resulted, and we even arrived at this, but—even then, just that—"

Just that—made me happy.

Happy enough to scare me.

"The one who's thinking of it as a fortuitous meeting—unexpectedly, might be me."

"...Don't say things you don't believe—just because it's the end. Or you'll soften the atmosphere."

After staying silent for a while, he said, sounding really annoyed.

"Archenemy—is it? Or rather, 'nemesis'."

"'I wish I had met you in a different way', don't say something like that. At this point—you and I can't become friends."

"I bet."

We both—did too much.

We had to end it here.

We had to part here.

From the start—until the end, we were fated to.

Therefore—

This should be correct.

"Now, I truly have nothing left to talk about, my enemy," The fox-masked said firmly. "What about you? Do you have anything else to tell me? Aah...you were the one who said you had nothing first, weren't you? Then—"

"To be honest... To be completely honest," I said. "I feel...like I haven't talked to you nearly enough."

"Is that so? Yeah. Me too, in reality."

However, the fox masked man continued.

"We need to return soon or—we'll miss the conclusion scene. We can't really permit that at this point. That's my true thought. Let's go back, my enemy."

"Yes—let's do that."

I felt like we left out too much.

And also like we talked too much.

Anyway—

Now, with that, it was the end.

The fox-masked man and I started to walk like it was nothing and headed back into the gymnasium. From the waiting room to the stage by the stairs.

Looking down at the gymnasium—

Those two weren't there.

Aikawa Jun.

Omokage Magokoro.

That reminded me, the sounds of hits had stopped for a while. Sometime during—my conversation with the fox-masked man, I couldn't hear them anymore.

"It looks like they moved elsewhere."

The fox-masked man said.

"Which one fled—which one pursued?"

"Fled?"

"Moved to a place where they have the advantage, I guess. This field clearly advantages my daughter so Magokoro probably fled. Hm—for that Magokoro to start using little tricks in a battle, I guess the conclusion is coming soon."

The fox-masked man swiftly turned to me.

"Soon, we'll both have to resolve ourselves."

"Resolve?"

"The resolve to kill, and the resolve to be killed."

"Putting the one for getting killed aside—resolve is unnecessary for killing, no? I think so, at least."

"Who knows. I think it's the opposite. The one getting killed is simply getting killed, but the one killing has to move by his own will."

"Mr. Fox, have you ever killed someone?"

"Enough to lose count."

The fox-masked man answered.

Then the fox-masked man asked me.

"My enemy, have you ever killed someone?"

"Enough to lose count."

I answered.

"With your own limbs?"

"What about you?"

"...That doesn't count as an excuse."

"Exactly, I agree."

We both jumped down onto the stage.

Then moved to the place where Aikawa-san and Magokoro had been repeating fierce exchanges until moments prior—the place looked like a flower of blood had bloomed.

This much blood—that would be enough for one, no, two people to die from hemorrhage. And not just that—it's not like they attacked it directly, but by simply stepping, the step had dents like it were hit multiple times by a hammer. Even though this place had already looked like it was in ruins, now it looked like a carnage that attracted the eye.

"This way, then."

The fox-masked man said.

Looking in that direction, drops of blood could be spotted—continuing further ahead.

Until the exit of the gymnasium.

"It's like Hansel and Gretel."

Said the fox-masked as he followed the traces of blood. I followed him while thinking it was definitely not something so fairy-tale-like.

I exited the gymnasium.

Obviously, it was pure dark.

"My enemy. What about the flashlight?"

"'What about' you say—I didn't have one from the start."

"We have no choice then."

After that exchange, we meandered after the blood traces relying only on the light of the moon.

Midway through—nails and teeth had fallen.

I got somewhat frightened then.

I didn't want to think about who they belonged to.

"Hey—Mr. Fox."

"What?"

"Why—did you stop at Aikawa-san?"

"Stop what?"

"The ER3 System's MS-2. I don't really want to say that, but—even if Aikawa-san was a failure, instead of leaving the Orange Seed to others—of handing her to others, had you created her, things wouldn't have come to this bothersome situation, no?"

"Be it a failure or a success, I never repeat the same thing twice. It seems you said that, didn't you?"

"Well, I did, but—but, I think that Jikoku-san's way of thinking wasn't completely wrong either. Even if ten years ago was a failure—had you used Magokoro really well, you might have reached what you call the *end of the world*."

"That kind of end—isn't something I want to see. That's not really an answer, is it?"

"So you're denying an end you don't like?"

"Naturally. Because I'm not a creator, but a reader."

The fox-masked man said.

The blood traces—

Continued into a building somewhat far away.

They penetrated the building from the glass windows.

The fox-masked man and I didn't have high enough athletic abilities to go in there after the blood traces, so we went around to a safe entry of the building and returned to the blood traces from there—then followed them.

The blood traces climbed the stairs.

From this point on—

The destruction resumed.

The building was broken here and there.

The stairs seemed like they would break under our feet.

Of course, that was—not destruction with the building's demolition in mind. That too, it was merely collateral.

How in the world—

Was this a fight between fellow humans?

The blood splatters—were like flowers.

Continuing up and up.

"Aikawa Jun and Omokage Magokoro—you can call them the peak of artistic creations. Created by not God but humans. You just called my Aikawa Jun, my daughter, a *failure*—however, she may be an outdated model, but she’s certainly not a failure."

It might have been a failure, but she wasn't one—the fox-masked man said.

"..."

"Of course, Magokoro isn't a failure either. Both of them were hits that reached the highest level—my daughter being an outdated model and Magokoro being her successor means that, while they are in different classes, they are, in a sense, the same."

"Well—that, I can understand."

"Let me see... If I had to point it out, the fundamental and essential difference would be that the Orange Seed is a complete creation—and

Overkill Red, an incomplete creation... Even then, the same is the same. But even then, you see—with just them, the world wouldn't let itself be ended. Although they possess existential power to rival the world—more than rampaging or being released, although they are inhuman enough to equal the whole of Humanity, even then—they can't rival destiny."

"Then—what do you mean?"

"You see, as you said, Jikoku's thinking wasn't wrong—it's no doubt that the moment I, Saitou Takashi, got the closest to the end of the world was ten years ago, when my daughter rampaged and was released. From Jikoku's perspective, that was probably right. I have no grounds to deny that either. Therefore—in regards to that, it was simply a matter of my preferences. I just didn't like it. Who cares, really."

"'Who cares'—is it?"

"Yeah."

The fox-masked man nodded.

"A matter of preferences."

Paaan.

Paaan, Paaan.

We heard the sounds of metallic objects hitting each other.

They were close.

These two...were close.

The conclusion—too, was very close.

In the hallway of the highest floor—

The Red and the Orange were facing each other.

With ten meters between them, plenty of distance.

Both of them—

Their bodies were full of wounds.

Out of breath.

Just breathing seemed painful.

Their whole bodies were covered in blood. Even Magokoro's blood turned red.

Neither of them were holding a stance.

Their arms hung loosely. No, were they broken? At least, they were turned in a weird direction and so swollen that I inadvertently nearly looked away.

Not only their arms, but their legs too.

How did they manage to stand?

Just the wind blowing seemed like it would make them collapse.

Even their fingers—didn't have a proper form.

Discolored parts all over their bodies.

Not just bruises, there were also many cuts and stabbing wounds.

Every wound—was done by bare hands.

Wounds, wounds, wounds.

Because they were alive—they got hurt.

Wounds...are painful.

Wounds come with pain.

Pain.

Suffering.

Those wounds were, without a doubt—only those two's.

Omokage Magokoro was looking at Aikawa Jun.

And Aikawa Jun was looking at Omokage Magokoro.

With crushed eyelids and debatably functional eyes—

Glaring at each other.

Confirming each other.

Covered by blood,

Covered in wounds,

Feeling the other's existence, and only feeling that.

Neither I—nor Saitou Takashi, entered their field of vision.

Did they see anything?

Did they hear anything?

Regardless, they didn’t feel us.

In both their worlds—there was only their color.

Hurt all over—full of wounds.

Washing the opponent's blood with your own, exchanging the opponent's flesh with your own, exchanging the opponent's bones with your own—full of wounds.

Even the teeth to clench on were broken.

These proud and beautiful girls,

Their hair colors,

Their smooth skin,

Their refined faces—everything ruined.

Ugly.

Repulsive.

"..."

However—even then.

I didn't think of their appearance as ugly.

That was the highlight.

They were too—proud and beautiful.

Even more than anything I had seen until then—

More than any music, more than any movie, more than any novel, more than any picture—more moving.

My heart was moved.

It throbbed.

"Hi...hihihihi."

"Ka...haa...hahah."

Even then—

Both were at an incomparable level, but even then, if I had to compare—Aikawa-san's wounds were more severe than Magokoro's.

An essential—difference.

The difference between the outdated and the successor.

After coming all this way—it was decisive.

Even if Aikawa-san was progressing in a predominant and superior position, her basic stamina, regeneration, and all these kinds of things were dimensions apart—for Magokoro, if she acted normally, that would have indeed been shaving to death.

Shaved to death.

However—

Even then, Aikawa-san was laughing.

Those lips that spurted blood when opened,

Where laughing inappropriately, cynically—

And beaming with fun.

Magokoro too...she seemed in pain. However, as if empathizing with Aikawa-san's beaming smile, she forced herself to smile.

Right—

Magokoro seemed in pain.

I'm sure she couldn't comprehend it.

Why the Red in front of her—wasn't collapsing.

Why she wasn’t retreating.

Why she wasn't running away.

I'm sure Magokoro couldn't understand.

For Magokoro—it was a difficult question.

For Magokoro, it wasn't simple.

The experience of *difficulty*—

For Magokoro, that must have been the first time in her life.

"—Magokoro."

I—unconsciously muttered.

"Are you currently—alive?"

Did you learn—what living was?

Are you thinking—that you don't want to die?

Then—

This feeling is yours.

That's the proof that you are living.

"My enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"This is the last chance—if you still want to stop those two."

"..."

"You already achieved your goal, didn't you? If you force on Magokoro the same thing you did on Izumu-kun in August—if you want to teach Magokoro what Izumu-kun taught you—the result is already fulfilled."

"...Right."

That was...on point.

There was no need to put it in words, it was obvious to the eye.

"Then—now's the last moment. If it's now, either of us should be able to stop them. It'd be easier than ripping the wings off fireflies."

"...Unfortunately."

I said.

Things like the end of the world—like the end of the Story.

Like my life, like Saitou Takashi's life.

Regardless of those.

"Coming all this way—I can't do something so boorish."

"...Even if one ends up losing their life?"

"If that can become the proof that they lived."

I see, nodding—

The fox-masked man fell silent, as if he was exceedingly bored.

Maybe he got fed up.

Maybe he thought he couldn't follow up.

But...that probably wasn't it.

Anyway—

With that, the fox-masked man and I—
Faded in the background.
Only two were left.
Only two were present in this world.

Aikawa Jun and—Omokage Magokoro.

"...Yo."
Magokoro—said with a voice full of blood.
With a voice that sounded like a moan.
"Aren't you...bored?"
"...Mm."
Aikawa-san suddenly—
Took on a stance again.
Now she had given up on folding her limbs to adjust to Magokoro—she didn't have enough leeway left.
"My bad, my bad...I didn't have enough blood, so I got in a bit of a daze—heheh, it's been a while since the last time I lost this much blood. Might even be the first... Eh? What did you say? Care to repeat it once more?"
"I asked whether you were bored."
Magokoro said.
Not releasing her wariness.
If she relaxed—
She might have collapsed on the spot.
"Isn't living—boring?"
"..."
"You...with as much power as you, well, that's...even if you don't have as much as me, with what you have—the world is simple...right?"
Simple.
As if having easy additions being constantly forced upon you for your whole life, without a moment's rest—simple.

"Yeah—it's simple," Aikawa-san said. "There's no resistance, it's boring. There are only things that piss me off and the level is awfully low. Why isn't everyone else doing things more properly—I can't understand. Every mind that makes up this world is boring, pisses me off, and annoys me, I can't put up with it."

"..."

"So I have no choice but to liven up things myself... Hahaha! With that worth, in most cases, I have more fun than I can possibly handle!"

Even now—is fun!

This world is truly magnificent!

Aikawa-san said proudly.

"How about you, is it fun, Orange Seed?"

"...You're crazy."

Magokoro said—along with a bitter smile.

"You're insane—doesn't this just hurt... It's painful and tough and hard and—

"—It just feels like I'll die, doesn't it?"

Magokoro smiled while crying.

"Finding this fun—you must have something wrong in your head—outdated model. Unfortunately, that program wasn't included in me... What in the world do you want me to understand from this slugfest—"

"It just means wives and tatami mats and the main character's personality are better when a bit outdated[4], Orange Seed—don't group an old model created in a peaceful age like you and a child like me that is the embodiment of war—you and I are totally different."

Totally different.

Aikawa-san—said so.

---

[4] A play on the expression "Wives and tatami are better when they're new."

Like when Izumu-kun denied my resemblance with Zerozaki—she denied her resemblance with Magokoro.

She established it—each and every difference between them.

The differences between the complete product—and the incomplete product.

"Feel like you'll die? That's nothing, then—aren't you living?"

"..."

"Also, aren't you stupid?"

Aikawa-san continued to talk.

"Fun things aren't always painful and tough and hard like this—something fun, you see, is much much much more fun. **What awaits you after this** is the real fun, isn't it? **This kind of thing** is ultimately just the start—compared to the time you'll dally with friends, this is really nothing. All this pain and toughness and anguish, all of it, the whole of it, you can bear it."

"Fr-friends."

"I have so many friends, you know? Even the Ii-chan you love is a super great friend of mine."

Aikawa-san said in a cynical tone.

With her usual—tone.

Along with her delightful smile.

"Of course, you're a friend from today onward too."

"...!"

"Let's do fun things together."

Magokoro—

Shivering like she was feeling cold, her whole body trembled. However, even after an expression like she couldn't feel any more pleasant—

Hop, she returned back into her low stance.

"We can't—become friends."

"Oi oi, you can't do me like that. You're so cold. I already decided, you know?"

"I mean, you—are going to get killed by me now."

"Nice, those caustic words... Yeah, come without restraint—be at ease, you won't die... I'll do my best—and hold back without mercy."

"I'm coming, loser."

"Come, winner."

The air—burst.

Sparks flew.

I heard the sound of static electricity exploding.

At the exact same time.

Magokoro and—Aikawa-san jumped.

With a speed that made me wonder where all this power came from, at the center of the straight line binding them, these two—

These two...crashed.

However, they couldn't use both their arms any more.

Neither were their legs able to rise.

Then at the end—with their body.

With just crashing their bodies.

Their whole bodies—their whole bodies and souls crashed.

The blood spurting from their wounds—were like screams.

As if it were their last moments.

Shaking.

They both bounced back behind, first stepping with leg to hold one—but even that was done unsteadily, swaying.

There was no longer a will there.

Feebly—and staggering.

Somehow, they tried to endure it—but it was too much.

Impossible.

Either one could have collapsed...at any moment.

However—

Aikawa-san who seemed to greatly collapse to the back forced a grand motion, and this time she was tilting to the front.

I thought she might collapse like that.

But,

"...AAAAH!"

Although there was a howl—

That was probably just a coincidence.

Neither necessity nor destiny—a coincidence.

Aikawa-san's arm, which couldn't move, by chance, grabbed Magokoro's neck, which was in front of her-

Then, Magokoro slipped on her feet.

On the blood-covered hallway-

With her bare feet that had no grip.

"...!!"

Raising a voice that didn't concretize as one—

With Magokoro pinned under Aikawa-san, both Omokage Magokoro and Aikawa Jun, went down together—

And fell down in the hallway of Sumiyuri Academy.

With Magokoro under—and Aikawa-san above.

Their bodies, which barely held on—not just the bones, mechanisms from all over their bodies—with an extremely unpleasant sound, seemed like they had finally broken.

Then-

Then, stillness.

"..."

"..."

Neither I—nor the fox-masked man had words.

There was not a single word to be said.

Everything—

We felt as if everything had ended.

But,

That stillness was just for a moment.

That split-second which felt like an eternity—

Was merely an instant.

"...Ghaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Using just force—leaving everything to force.

With her broken arms.

With her broken legs—Aikawa Jun stood up.

With unreliable feet,

Unsteadily wavering—

Even then, Aikawa-san stood straight.

Without borrowing anyone's shoulder—she stood up.

"...Ha, haha...hahah."

And—she still laughed.

She laughed—as if she was having fun.

Suddenly—

Aikawa-san directed her eyes towards me and the fox-masked man as if she just noticed us.

No—not me.

I didn't enter her vision.

The only one in it—

The only one in her world was the fox-masked man.

Saitou Takashi—her father, only him.

"Look—how about it, shitty dad."

Although she probably wasn't even conscious—

She said distinctly towards her father.

With a challenging look.

With a provocative smile, she said.

On the other hand—the fox-masked man.

Hm, laughed with his nose as usual.

"You were always the Strongest."

At that time—

I missed Saitou Takashi's expression.

"You are the daughter I'm proud of—who shouldn't be ashamed of anyone."

Don't admit it at a time like this, blockhead—

Muttering that.

Aikawa-san collapsed again on top of Magokoro.

I thought of rushing in—but stopped.

I didn't even have to worry myself... Aikawa-san unconsciously avoided Magokoro, and fell down as if protecting her. Magokoro lying face up - and Aikawa-san covering her up almost looked like they were hugging each other.

Though all covered in wounds.

However—they looked like a parent and her child.

"...Well, the amount of blood that differed with the body's size in the end of the end of the end—worked well for her. Even if Magokoro unconsciously released the *spell* from her mind," The fox-masked man—commented as he looked at them. "If they had the same body size, the winner could have been either."

The difference between an incomplete product—

And a complete product, huh?

"Aikawa-san didn't have any binding—at least, none of this sort, huh."

"She's had this nice body since ten years ago. Though that was my, Junya, and Akira's preferences."

"..."

You guys...

What kind of expectations did you have of your daughter?

"The chains Magokoro cast on herself were merely for her sake—my daughter’s self-suppression had always been for other people's sake."

Therefore—

Therefore she's sweet, the fox-masked man said.

"Had she been able to exert that strength at the start of October, this story wouldn't have meandered about until now. Hm. In the first place, my daughter underestimates the world too much—she underestimates destiny too much. However... Even then, for you, it must have all happened as predicted, my enemy."

"Everything did go as expected—but it wasn’t the best case scenario. Even if the story advances along the plot, it's still disheartening if that happens through last resort plans."

I said.

"I was also taught by Izumu-kun this way—however, that was only a temporary measure. The true hardships will only start now."

"Hm."

"I'm not thinking everything will go well the first time. But, for starters—Magokoro won't leave Aikawa-san’s side."

"Agreed. No matter how much you search through this world, no one but Aikawa Jun—can treat Magokoro as her peer. But whether that's a good thing or a bad thing..."

"It's not a bad thing."

"Hm. You can't quarrel alone, can you?"

The fox-masked man said.

"Although—that also applies to my daughter, huh... Was that also included in your plan, my enemy?"

"Well... Somewhat."

The fox-masked man—seemed surprised

No, it's not—it's not like I wasn't wishing for that either. Seeing the battle between Aikawa-san and Magokoro, it's not like I didn't wish for her

to hold feelings towards the fox-masked man, Humanity's Worst—Saitou Takashi.

However, that wish—probably wouldn't be fulfilled.

I'm sure that was merely a whim.

Like a coincidence.

Only valid once, temporarily, just that.

But,

Even then—a problem of preference.

The reason why the Orange Seed wasn't the end of the world—

"Hey, Mr. Fox."

I—decided to ask one more time.

"Why didn't you bet on Aikawa-san...but on Magokoro?"

"..."

"Although I said some things earlier—from the start... Perhaps since last month, no, even before that—did you perceive that the complete Magokoro wouldn't be able to beat the incomplete Aikawa Jun?"

"In my roots, I still believed Magokoro would win. If I had bet on my daughter."

"...Eh?"

"From the start, I'm an existence who can't be allied with my daughter. Even now—even ten years ago. It has always been that way—always, that girl was more interesting as an enemy."

Now, the fox-masked man cut in as if signifying this story had ended.

"Then—shall we end it?"

"..."

"Don't worry about those two—in reality, I had contacted Emoto and Konomi from the start. They're probably waiting by the entrance gate, so give them a call and they'll surely make it in time. After all, these two's regenerative power is off the charts."

Step, step, step.

The fox-masked man approached me.

"Surely after all this—you won't end it like a buffoon, saying 'I won't kill you, after all I can't kill people. I'd prefer getting killed to becoming a murderer,' right, my enemy?"

"...Do you want to die?"

"Surely not."

The fox-masked man answered on the spot.

He answered the same question in the same way.

"I still haven't seen—the end of the world."

"Don't you think that now, this moment, is the end of the world—and the end of the Story?"

"Not quite."

The fox-masked man said.

"It's nothing on that level."

"..."

"It's nothing like that. I'm still not satisfied at all."

He laughed as if making fun of me from the bottom of his heart.

"As if it'd end this way."

I—

Swiftly took out the Jericho inserted in the back of my jeans—

While feeling all of its weight in my palm. Feeling the weight of this gun—filled to the brim with bullets.

I pointed the barrel towards Saitou Takashi.

"With that distance—it's a bit uneasy."

The fox-masked man said, as if he didn't feel any fear.

"Come closer."

"..."

I took a step towards the fox-masked man.

"More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. More. ...Right there. That position is just right."

The barrel of the jericho was—

Pointing just in front of the fox-masked man's nose.

Automatic.

No need to raise the hammer.

Pushing the trigger—will end it.

Everything will end.

This long fight—will end.

"Close the curtain."

The fox-masked man said.

"Isn't that your right—Nonsense User?"

"...Don't fuck with me."

I said, with the barrel firmly pointed.

No, I couldn't fix it.

I was trembling.

Shivering.

With fear—right, fear.

Up to now—I had been unbelievably scared of him.

"How is this—the Nonsense User's role?"

"..."

"That's—not my job. If—if you're ready to throw away your stupid ambition of ending the world... I don't mind breaking my promise with you."

"It's impossible."

The fox-masked man said calmly, as if he wasn't seeing the gun.

"After all this, I can't throw my ambition away. I sacrificed way too many things—to do that. From worthless ones to irreplaceable ones, as if they had the same value, as if they were the same."

"..."

"At this point, even my life wouldn’t be sufficient."

"You...in the ten years you spent in the Saitou Clinic, did you not feel anything?"

"I didn't feel anything and I didn't imagine anything. And of course, I didn't think of anything. I was already made this way."

"If you—say you're going to give up on that ambition... I wouldn't mind becoming your friend."

"I refuse."

The fox-masked man said.

"I don't need friends. Not anymore."

"..."

"Go have that kind of soft talk with my daughter."

Saying that—he smiled in the Worst way.

"You go well together, you two."

I can't fool it.

I can't deceive it.

I can't leave it vague.

I can't leave it ambiguous.

I can't leave it unclear.

Now—

I had arrived at the terminal.

"Why? Have you become frightened? That should be fine in its own way. I only wish to create the *Thirteen Stairs* anew and yearn for the end of the world again."

"...!"

"If you want to stop me, you must kill me—or perhaps, do you intend to foil my plans for the rest of your life?"

Once—

When Saitou Takashi gave up on me—

I shouldn't have let him escape.

I shouldn't have recognized his escape.

If the opponent retreats—
I should have pressed further in, without mercy.
I should have thrusted in, using it as an opportunity.
Then, I—
This was the moment to redo it.

Right—
I will save the world.

"...Understood."
I said.
"Please die—Saitou Takashi-san. I will kill you and live on."
"Do as you like."
I'll end—one step ahead.
The fox-masked man said so.
A lot of things rushed into my mind.
A lot of people rushed into my mind.
Every person I had met until then.
Especially in the last few months—I remembered them.
Asano Miiko, Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta, Nanananami Nanami, Hayabusa Koutamaru, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko, Niounomiya Izumu, Ishimaru Kouta, Katanashi Rabumi, Suzunashi Neon, Ikaruga Kazuhito, Sasa Sasaki.
Aikawa Jun.
Omokage Magokoro.
Saitou Takashi.
Kajou Akira, Ichirizuka Konomi, Emoto Sonoki, Utage Kudan, Furuyari Zukin, Tokinomiya Jikoku, Migishita Rurero, Yamiguchi Nureginu, Miotsukushi Misora, Miotsukushi Takami, Noise, Kino Raichi.
And—Kunagisa Tomo.
"Yo—by the way."

The fox-masked man suddenly said.

"Do you really think this is the end?"

"...? What do—you mean?"

"From here on, on the road you're on—people like me will appear one after the other. No matter where you go, no matter what you do. Are you saying you're going to live—while understanding this?"

"..."

"For me, you're the end—but for you, I'm not the end. For you, I'm only the start. In the end—nothing but the end. With the current situation, that's probably your only choice. Then, from here on, you'll be attacked by countless misfortunes and much bad luck. All sorts of heretics and every kind of abnormality will rush your way. Don't think you've erased all foreshadowing, don't think you've encompassed all of the world. The world you know is merely a part of this world. A second and third me will soon appear before you. Even then—do you still want to live? Even then, do you still want to end it, do you still want to go somewhere?"

"Somewhere—"

"What in the world are you going to do now?"

The fox-masked man—

Saitou Takashi sneered at me, and said.

"Answer. From here on, where are you going?"

Saitou Takashi repeated again, overlapping his question many times.

"Where do you want to go—Nonsense User?"

"I..."

Firmly staring at Saitou Takashi's eyes—

I answered Saitou Takashi.

"I won't go anywhere anymore—"

Then, I pressed the trigger of my own will.

"I'm going home."

LAST ACT – AND THEN AFTER THAT

ME (NARRATOR)

PROTAGONIST

I woke up to the sound of a well-behaved knock.

"...Oooh."

...It surprised me.

I thought it was an "everything was a dream" punchline.

I was still in a daze, trying to figure out the small gap between dream and reality, swaying my head left and right. "Waking up," I muttered to myself as if checking.

It looks like I ended up sleeping on the sofa.

Errr...

What was I doing yesterday again...?

I checked my watch.

Half past nine of the morning.

Although it's a time unfit for a working person, since I was self-employed, well, it was early enough to be allowed.

Hmm...

However, who was planning on visiting at such an early hour today—I made a promise to meet up with someone I hadn't seen for a while in the afternoon, but that's why I should have decided to quietly do some desk work in the morning.

As I was thinking, the knock continued.

Although they could be thinking I was absent, they were persistent.

It was well-behaved, yet persistent.

That just means their business is that important, I guess.

Well, it might just be a salesman or something.

"Yes yes! I'm coming now!"

Saying that, I crawled up from the sofa and headed towards the door. After checking through the fish eye just in case, I unlocked the door and opened it.

There was a highschool girl there.

In a uniform, with a blazer.

A school emblem at her collar.

Straight long hair reaching her hip and an alice band.

School shoes, white socks reaching her ankles.

Her appearance made her look like an honor student. However, the worried look she gave me from the gap in the door gave her a suspicious vibe.

"...This isn't really a place a highschool girl should come to, though."

She didn't say anything, so I started the discussion myself.

I wonder, had she chosen the wrong room? Who could a highschool girl be looking for...Nanananami, maybe? Or perhaps she was Houko-chan's friend? But there was no way I wouldn't know Houko-chan's friends. Then... No, in the first place, today was a weekday. Wasn't half past nine the time when she should be at school? She was wearing her uniform too overtly to just be playing hooky...then, could she be a student that goes to school at nighttime?

"..."

The girl tried to mutter something with a dry, fading voice while looking down.

It seemed she was quite shy.

"Err—do you have some business with me? If it's some sales pitch, then—"

"I-I didn't go to the wrong room."

The girl raised her face with a resolved look, and said.

"And, it's not a sales pitch. Th-this—"

Saying that, the girl took out a card from her uniform's breast pocket. I received it, thinking to myself ‘What, modern high schoolers are quite stylish to have cards for introduction’—

But I soon learned that wasn't the purpose of the girl's card.

"Heeh...I see."

I ended up looking fixedly at that card. No, well, you could say it was its original use, so it's not really something to be surprised about.

"Then, err—what's your name?"

"M-my name?"

"Yes, name."

"Honna Asahi, I guess?"

"You guess?"

Why did she question her own name?

I slightly turned back towards the inside of the room, then, to the girl—Asahi-chan,

"I'd like to go inside now, but..."She said.

"You see, I woke up early as usual and was doing daily chores, cleaning up the room, so it's pretty messy. Also, there's a loud bunch that wouldn't shut up if I brought a highschool girl inside my room. Do you know of somewhere around here to go?"

"Er... Errrrr."

Asahi-chan went into a panic.

Trembling and flustered.

It seemed like her range of adaptability was extremely narrow.

"...Well, then, if we go east on Nakadachiuri Street, there should be a coffee shop named *Threeday March*. Wait for me there. Tell them I sent you and they'll give you a seat in the back."

"Y-yes."

"Also, if possible, your uniform stands out, so if you could change into something else..."

"Sorry, that I can't..."

"I see."

I nodded.

"My-my gym clothes maybe..."

"That'd stand out even more."

"U-uuugh..."

"Then it's fine. I'll change clothes and catch up to you... Let me see, wait for about 10 minutes. They're a coffee shop, but their black tea is much tastier, so be careful."

I said that, waved my hand to relieve Asahi-chan, and closed the door. Looking through the fish eye, Asahi-chan stood by the door for a while looking bored, but eventually went back through the hallway, got in the elevator and descended to the first floor.

"Now then..."

I locked the door again. The sound of a lock sounded like a rejection, so I preferred not letting my clients hear it. It might've been meaningless, but well, it was my so-called consideration as a pro. I turned back towards the sofa and laid the shirt and half pants I was removing on it, then moved to the cabinet.

I chose one of the files from it and took it out.

The blazer that girl was wearing was exceedingly common, with an orthodox design, so I couldn't specify which school she was from at first glance. However, the story is different for the badge. I could find it by the design, form, and the writing in the middle.

"There, there... Oh. That's a famous school."

Sakuraba High School.

One of Kyoto's many private high level schools. There's also a middle school department on the same grounds. Although they study together, clubs are strictly divided between boy and girl ones. It's like having a boy's school and a girl's school on the same grounds.

Returning the file to the cabinet, I next booted up the laptop on my desk. It wasn't a recent one, so it took some time to start up. In that short while, I went to the other room—my private room, and chose my clothes. I was using my residence as a workplace, but I made sure to differentiate between my private room and my office. Well, though I said that, I slept on the sofa in my office.

Then, I casually looked at the bed, and remembered the reason I slept on the sofa. Aah, right, I couldn't use the bed. So that was why. There must’ve been something wrong with me for forgetting that... However, I was somewhat angry, so I kicked the leg of the bed.

NaturallY, the bed didn't react.

It was a meaningless action.

Now...I need to change.

An outfit, huh.

It was a kid, so if I went with something too serious, they would freak out... But on the other hand, thinking of her age, going with a look too casual might end up making her even more worried. I can't think of myself playing the role of a reliable person, but I somewhat needed to have that readiness. In the end, I chose a business suit of a plain color and didn't put on a necktie.

Leaving the private room, I headed back to the office.

After lightly arranging my hair and such, I inputted my password on the computer that had already started and operated it. Sakuraba High School. The badge of a second year. Knowing that much was enough for my research.

"Honna Asahi... From the pronunciation, I think it should be written like that, but..."

However—

As I thought, nothing came up.

There was no student named Honna Asahi at Sakuraba High School.

Just in case, I tried to search with different kanji for "Honna" and "Asahi" but the result was the same. There was no need to search for more combinations. Either her name was a lie, or her being from Sakuraba was a lie... Or perhaps even both. There were three possibilities, but I thought the fake name one was more probable. It wasn't so rare for clients to lie about their names.

Well, it was fine.

I just needed to ask if I ever needed to know.

I still prepared and collected data concerning Sakuraba High School, took my bag, put on my shoes and left the room.

My shoes were sneakers.

I didn't think it'd take that much time, but well, I chose to directly head to my afternoon plan after that. Thinking that, I locked the door.

Took the elevator to the first floor.

Then, I ran into Miiko-san.

"Yo."

"Ah, yeah. Good morning."

"You can't really call this early."

"It seems so."

"What's up? That outfit. Going to work now?"

"Something like that."

I nodded.

"What about you, Miiko-san? Are you absent from work today?"

"No. To be honest, I got fired yesterday."

"...You should stick to just one job soon."

"To think a day where I'd hear that from you would come."

Miiko-san faintly smiled.

"Good grief. If only I had known you'd become someone so proper at that time."

"If you had known, what would happen? I don't think it's too late, even now."

"Hmm."

Miiko-san crossed her arms.

"I'll think about it."

"..."

So you will?

So you will?!

Anyhow, Miiko-san said.

"So I'm thinking of going to Suzunashi's place today. Do you have something you want me to tell her?"

"No, nothing much. Aah, please thank her for me for helping me out with a job last time. If not for Suzunashi-san, I would be dead."

"Got it."

"Ah, right. That reminds me, Miiko-san, you sometimes go to train kendo clubs in highschools, right?"

"Yes. Well, through side connections."

"Do you know of Sakuraba High School?"

"Aah... The kendo club there is strong. It's like they're strong in every domain. They also have been the prefecture's representatives. What about it?"

"No. I just might have to borrow your help for this job. If I ever need to, I'll come to see you, so I'll rely on you then."

"Umu. Make the money fly."

"Of course, it'll bloom."

I got off the elevator and Miiko-san got in.

Then, time to go.

Going out from the building—

I looked up at the six storey building built in the space which was once called the "rundown apartment".

Of course, the area of the site in itself didn't change, so the narrow building looked like a tower... Even after many years passed, I still wasn't used to it. Miiko-san said,

"The new rundown apartment is just a tower apartment."

And made a joke that barely passed for an adult and accepted it without caring much. As for myself, I won't say it was better before, but the rent being a few times higher than before was honestly tough at first.

One apartment per floor.

The area of each one was simply doubled and included a bath, toilet, and kitchen, but its initial raison d'être was being cheap.

At least, it should have been.

Well.

Even then—no one had left.

Everyone said that moving was a pain or something, each with a haphazard reason—and didn't try to move out.

It was probably a glorious mistake for the landlord, but Koutoumaru-san, Nanananami, Houko-chan and Miiko-san—everyone, lived here.

Everyone came back here.

"Four years since then, huh..."

I won't say it makes me emotional though.

"...A home, huh."

I shrugged and said "I'm going," to no one in particular, then went out to Nakadachiuri Street and headed towards the coffee shop *Threeday March*.

I opened the door which had a ringing bell with one hand and greeted the master, who silently showed me to the back of the shop. Asahi-chan was sitting in the appointed seat, looking around the shop nervously, seemingly unable to calm down.

No sign of having touched the black tea laid in front of her.

Was a coffee shop too fancy for a highschool girl...?

I didn't think that was the case though.

She seemed like a girl from a reasonably wealthy family.

"Sorry for the wait, Asahi-chan."

After calling out to her, I sat facing her.

"A-ah, no, that's...I didn't wait."

"I see. That's good. I don't like making people wait much, you see," I said. "So, for starters, I want to ask you, before we get down to business—"

I took out the card Asahi-chan handed me earlier and gently laid it on the table.

"This. Who did you get it from?"

"Ah, err—a friend on the net."

"Hmm."

"I don't know their real name—but their username is Lynx. They said you would know about that."

"...Yeah."

I see. Lynx, huh.

Like that, I can see how highschool girls would come to me. That said, from what I can tell, Lynx hid my identity from Asahi-chan...

Well, that wasn't a problem I should interfere with.

The only problem was the business card.

That was—my business card. However, order made, with only ten existing in the world. Replicating it was, in fact, simple, but there was a hidden characteristic only I could perceive, so I could tell the genuine article from a fake.

Also, there was no real meaning in replicating them.

They're not really useful for normal people.

Simply, when someone showed me this card, no matter who it was, no matter the content of the request—I would have to accept it free of charge, that's all it was.

Well, it was like a service coupon.

"I was fearing what kind of outrageous person Lynx would give this card to—but I'm relieved it's a cute girl like you. Then, well—I'm giving it back to you."

"Eh?"

"The benefit only works once, so you can't use it again—so, when there's someone in need around you, like how Lynx did, you'll present them with this card."

"Eh, errr."

"By the way, it's inadvisable to exchange it for money. There's a mechanism so that I'd know when that happens. If you do it, you'd have to be really sneaky or it's no good. You could say that card is just a proof of trust...so the card in itself doesn't mean much. It's simply for when you want to help out friends in a bind."

"..."

"Therefore, no matter the request you're going to make, there are things I can and cannot do. Ultimately, I'll be the one to judge that."

"Un-understood."

"You don't have to be so tense—I'm not someone so admirable or great. As you can see, I'm just a youngster whose age isn't that different from yours."

"B-but."

Asahi-chan said.

"I heard from Lynx you were a great detective able to resolve any request on the spot."

"Great detective, huh."

The nuance was a bit strange.

Rather than strange, it was nostalgic.

"To be accurate, a contractor."

"..."

"Though a starting one. It's not good to accept that praise entirely. Yes, that's just a personal opinion, and in reality, there are differences between people. Also—what I solve aren't cases but problems."

I ordered a coffee from the master who was washing the counter. I waited for it to arrive, took a sip, and,

"Then, let's get down to business."

I said.

As I said that, Asahi-chan looked like it was really hard for her to talk, but we somewhat got down to *business*. Well, despite what I said, from her perspective, I was just someone introduced to her by a friend on the net, just a suspicious man. So a shy girl like her acting this tense didn't bring down my mood much. In the end, gaining the trust of the client is the hardest part of any case. That, I learned from experience.

Trust.

Trust...is a good word.

"I—have a brother."

"Brother? A big brother?"

Yes, Asahi-chan confirmed.

"My brother goes to the same school, but—err, um—at my school, clubs are separated by genders so we don't meet much."

"Hmm."

So there was no need to research beforehand, I thought.

She might have been thinking she was hiding it, but she basically confessed that the name of the school she commutes to was Sakuraba. Also, there was her uniform and badge... Or perhaps Asahi-chan was so cornered she couldn't even think of that.

"So, what about your brother?"

"My brother—might be a murderer."

Asahi-chan—

Said with a truly suffering expression.

"At the very least...he is suspected to be."

"...That's not very refreshing," I commented on my thoughts and said in a suppressed voice. "What do you mean?"

"Um..."

Then—Asahi-chan fell in silence.

It looked like she hesitated to say it herself.

It couldn't be helped, I thought.

I had to step in a little myself.

"Sakuraba High School."

"Eh?"

"That's your school. Right?"

"Eh...eh?"

"Was I wrong?"

"Eh, no, that's right but—how?"

Asahi-chan looked seriously surprised.

I silently pointed at Asahi-chan's uniform, then her badge. "Ah!" Asahi-chan raised a surprised voice as if she really hadn't noticed.

"If you wanted to hide your identity, you should have changed clothes."

"Ah, b-but—"

"From that I can tell, you're a serious girl without malicious intent. I can tell you're not the type to lie—and that you came to me in secret from your family, especially your brother. You pretended to go to school, but came to my place, right? Or else you wouldn't have had gym clothes. That included, I think I can sufficiently understand that your problem weighs heavily and seriously on your mind. But—"

I said.

"If you can't talk to me honestly, I can't help you."

"..."

"I don't want to become someone unable to save a cute girl like you so—if possible, could you give me more information? I'm still a newbie, you see. I can't do anything with this little information."

"...Y-yes."

Asahi-chan was apologetic. I didn't really intend to pressure her—but I guess it's just that hard to handle girls of that age. Thinking "Good grief, I'm still inexperienced," I continued talking.

"Sakuraba High School, if I remember correctly, six months ago—one student died. I think they jumped from the roof? Are you talking about that case?"

"Yes... B-but how."

Asahi-chan looked surprised again. That was also merely some data I picked up earlier when researching about Sakuraba High School. So it shouldn't serve as an indicator of my abilities, but well, let's play the part still. There's no need to purposely explain.

Most of it was hacking, also...

Despite being lumps of private info, schools' security systems are often child's play. That's common sense. Be careful, well-behaved kids.

"When explaining about your brother, you explicitly left out the name of the school—so it probably had to do with school. Among the people affiliated with Sakuraba High School in the last three years, the only student with a record of having died was Setose Iroha-san."

"Yes...and why three years?"

"Since a second year like you calls him 'big brother', he must be in third or second year at least. In other words, that's the person your brother was present at this school for."

"Waa—"

Asahi-chan raised her voice in wonder.

It kinda made me bashful.

Also, it felt like I was deceiving her, so I also felt remorse.

In reality, I searched through the last 5 years of Sakuraba High School's records. However, the only serious incident I found was the one from half a year ago. So I prepared beforehand in case of this being related to her request, and—

Bingo.

"But—even then, that was left as just an incident. Are you saying your brother did it?"

"No...the police say it's an incident. Same for the teachers. But—my brother is suspected."

"By who?"

Leaving out the police and the teachers—

The only ones left are the students.

I said that, and Asahi-chan nodded.

Hmm—since Lynx sent her to me, I guess it's not just on the level of a bad rumor. It should be much more concrete and dangerous.

"In short—your brother pushed Setose Iroha from the roof?"

"No, not exactly—"

Asahi-chan said.

"That wasn't an incident, but a suicide."

"Suicide?"

"And—my brother forced her to kill herself. That's—what everyone is saying."

She was squeezing out the words from her mouth.

However, that just showed how tough she was.

She wasn't simply a timid and shy girl.

I nodded.

"I see. It's even more trouble than simply being suspected with murder. He didn't do anything concretely—he didn't push her down physically, so alibis, proofs and showing the impossibility of the crime would be meaningless."

I said.

"But it shouldn't work without a connection. Being suspected like that—is there any ground for it? Between your brother and Setose Iroha-san."

"..."

"Say it."

"I—"

Asahi-chan's gaze lowered to the black tea.

"I was bullied by Setose-san."

"...Heeh."

I couldn't see it.

However, for someone with a shy personality like her, well, I guess it was not weird to be a target. Anyway, even if the bully had a reason, the bullied had none in most cases. That's often not talked about.

"And—immediately after my brother heard about this...Setose-san—jumped off."

"I was the first one to use the words 'jumped off'—but if it was an incident, it should be better described as 'fell off'. There's some misdirection there. From the start, it included an element to deceive people," I said. "Falling from up to down is something we can't avoid due to gravity. That's why people longed for the sky. However—if not for birds and

bugs, people surely wouldn't have had the thought of flying through the air—"

"Eh?"

"That wasn't related. I never grew out of my habit of talking to myself. Excuse me for that. However, Asahi-chan, I got the gist of it. Then—there was no direct connection between Setose-san and your brother, right? They were merely related through you."

"Yes."

"They didn't know the other any further—hmm. Well, there was an insurmountable wall between the boy and girl sections. However, I wonder if that's really something to suspect this much?"

"..."

"Especially—because of that insurmountable wall."

"My brother—is a problem child."

Asahi-chan said.

"There was a testimony of someone seeing him crossing that wall—and arguing with Setose-san in the girls' section."

"He's got quite the guts."

He was the role model of a big brother.

Unlike me.

If I had to say, like Izumu-kun?

"It's nothing to be praised about."

Asahi-chan said as if my light remark worsened her mood.

What a serious girl.

Nice.

"But—this and that, was all for my sake."

"..."

"My brother was a problem child...but even then, he is kind to me only. For me—he is a kind brother."

"Having his little sister say that, I'm sure the brother is frowned upon by fortune. That said, it's too precipitous to say he killed Setose-san yet. No matter what."

To create a pause, I lifted up my coffee, drank, and made a noise by putting it back on the plate.

"So, what do you want me to do?"

"...Er, err," Asahi-chan hesitated for some time, then said. "So I want you—to find the true culprit."

"..."

"Certainly... The police didn't find it a problem, but for Setose-san to jump off—fall off, that situation has some problems. I get why someone gets suspected. I get it. So—"

"If we go with those conditions—"

I said as if stabbing Asahi-chan.

"I might determine your brother to be the true culprit."

Hearing those words, Asahi-chan fell silent.

I continued with another question.

"Asahi-chan—what's your thoughts on it? Do you think your brother is a murderer?"

"...My-my brother—"

Asahi-chan answered.

"My brother is—to be frank, a pain in the ass."

"A pain in the ass?"

"A pain in the ass."

"A pain in the ass..."

"Quite a pain in the ass. Far above a problem child. He creates rules inside his head, and when they don't match with other people, he prioritizes his own over the others. So—he's always a source of trouble for me."

"..."

"In reality, until now—in middle and elementary school, this kind of thing happened. Then, he was the culprit. He was the culprit. That's why—it

can't be helped that he's suspected this time. I get the feelings of the people suspecting him."

Asahi-chan raised her gaze.

Looking at my eyes.

As if glaring at me.

"But—my brother would have done it with his own hands."

She said,

"My brother isn't someone to make me feel this way. He wouldn't have made me feel this vague feeling that could go either way. He doesn't do that. Therefore—"

"..."

"Therefore, I believe in my brother's innocence."

Asahi-chan said.

"I trust in my brother."

"Good words."

I said, as if accepting her.

Trust.

"Then—if you request it as 'Proving your brother's innocence,' I'll accept it. Then that's my business. Essentially, it's just making the students understand it's not your brother's doing, right?"

"Eh...b-but."

Asahi-chan objected.

"But if you don't find the true culprit—"

"There's plenty of ways. This world is full of holes. Rather, that's why, if possible, I'd prefer keeping that method for the end. Even if you find the culprit, it doesn't mean anything if the doubts aren't cleared. Also—personally, I'm not too fond of it. Things like finding the culprit or the bad guy. Isn't that too violent? I'm a born pacifist, you see. That doesn't go well with my nature. I don't solve cases, but problems."

I said.

"Every word is inscribed in my dictionary—

"Let's solve it by talking."

After that, I heard the details of the case from Asahi-chan, then her real name, her brother's name, and about the people involved. From my side, I asked for the minimum, her phone number. Also, since she brought the card, her fees were for free, but I told her there was still the need to pay for the necessary amount in some way. I then parted ways with the highschool girl client.

The time was noon.

It didn't look like I had the time to return to the apartment.

I had to go directly.

I was wearing a jacket, so it should’ve been fine.

I thanked the master, left *Threeday March*, raised my arm a bit away and picked up a taxi.

Then straight to Kyoto Station.

The meeting spot was a restaurant with a panoramic view in an international hotel nearby the Kyoto Station.

She was there before me.

"...Yo."

Wearing a suit overall coordinated with red, she was the one who stood out the most the moment I entered the restaurant—Aikawa Jun was looking at me, still at the entrance, and lazily, lightly, as if she had seen me the day prior, waved her hand.

Even though it had been a few months.

How should I put it, she was as usual.

I returned the greeting with "It’s been a while," before sitting next to her. We had a sweeping view of Kyoto's streets from there. Apparently Aikawa-san had already ordered for us, since the well-behaved staff brought us drinks without us saying anything.

"Sorry, it seems I’ve made you wait."

"It's fine. I was also nearly late. I went to search for the philosopher's stone on my way to Kyoto but had a bit of trouble finding it."

"..."

Please don't do that on the side.

As usual—she was classy.

"Then, let's make a toast for whatever."

"Thanks."

Ching, our glasses made a small sound.

After that, we both exchanged information on recent circumstances. Well, our positions were too different even in the same business, but being old acquaintances helped here.

"Hmm. Then, you met a client, huh."

"Though it's a job without reward. I thought I'd pass it off to Jun-san if it turned out to be a hassle, but well, it seems manageable, or at least something I can handle myself."

"Really? Just from hearing the gist, it smells kinda dangerous though."

"...If you say that, it might turn out to be true, so please refrain from saying anything."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Let me see. Despite being open, schools are also insular, so—umm, being too old myself, I was thinking of getting Houko-chan's help. In terms of appearance, Misora-chan or Takami-chan would have been fine, but twins stand out too much. Those two aren't suited for undercover missions. So I guess Houko-chan is the best fit."

"Houko-chan, huh. I haven't seen her in years. How's she doing?"

"Aah, she's smoothly growing from a pretty girl to a pretty woman. It's like she far surpassed my expectations. I don't know if I'll be able to wait three more years—"

"Three more years?"

"Ah, no, nothing."

Self-restraint.

Rather, voluntary restraints.

In the end, she never had been to school until now, but being a seventeen year old girl, putting a uniform on her would fool the common person. Then obtaining the uniform was the problem—but anything can be done about that. If necessary, I could just borrow it from the client.

Houko-chan in a uniform, huh... It was a good occasion, so I should try to make her wear all sorts of stuff. I've seen her in a swimsuit and some others when we went to the beach last time and it was the best, so that's fine, but how about it, maybe it's time to try out maid clothes... No! To construct the perfect plan, the perfect growth of the perfect Houko-chan, I still need to hold on...

"Also, depending on the developments, I might have to borrow Miiko-san's help...jumping off probably counts as a case, so I'll have to probe the police, but that can be done with ex-post-facto approval. It doesn't seem to matter much either."

"You gained some dignity. It honestly pisses me off."

"..."

I honestly pissed her off.

"Even though you were a brat unable to do anything by himself the first time I met you."

"Even now—I can't do anything alone."

I said.

"Without everyone, I can't do anything."

"That's a good thing."

"Is it good?"

"That means everyone is by your side."

"...Well of course," I made the motion of shrugging my shoulders. "Hey, Jun-san. May I—ask one thing?"

"What."

"Um, did you go along with the brat that couldn't do anything on his own for so long—because he resembled your father?"

"Stupid."

Aikawa-san laughed cynically.

"Even if that's true or however it might be—you are you, right? You are you and no one else. You don't look anything alike. You don't look like anyone else. Right?"

"...Well, that's true, but..."

I just asked on a whim.

It didn't have any special meaning.

"How is—Magokoro doing?"

"Ahn?"

"I thought she might have been with you today again."

"Aah...wanted to meet her?"

"Not really, it's fine if she's busy—just, I was convinced she would be with Jun-san."

"She's currently with Kouta."

"With Kouta-san?"

"I'll be unable to handle her alone—like a rebellious phase? I sent her on a journey with Kouta to not only teach her sweetness, but also this world's loneliness."

"You sent her..."

"Hihihi. By the time she comes back, her pronoun will surely have become *Boku-chan*."

"..."

Magokoro... What a poor girl...

Even though it's to teach her about this world's loneliness, there was no need for Aikawa-san to entrust her to Kouta-san.

"It was also the case for Ichihime. It just seems I'm not suited to raise people... It's not like I abandon them, but Kouta-san wanted to lend a helping hand, so we made a deal."

"I see..."

That explained why I hadn't been contacted by Magokoro recently. Given her athletic abilities, Kouta-san must be putting her to use well... Well, despite her existing stats, she's overwhelmingly lacking in exp points. This might be a good occasion for Magokoro, who's on demon lord level.

"So, what about Jun-san? Did you find the philosopher's stone?"

"Yeah."

"..."

So you did.

"But it's not like that's the end of it. I'm also carrying 5 or 6 jobs, so it's been a serious hassle recently. Thanks to that infamous Impostor-chan, I was able to relax for a time though. This time Impostor-chan did a pretty excellent job. Though it's a shame she tries to kill me every time she finds an opportunity—let me see, the request that should be prioritized the most should be Iria's, I guess."

"From Iria-san?"

"The same one as before. 'Kasugai Kasuga disappeared, so go capture her.'"

"...Did she flee again, Kasugai-san."

"I heard this time she cut trees and made a raft to escape."

"So she's surprisingly an outdoor type..."

"Looks like Iria took an insane liking to Kasugai Kasuga. Jeez, even though before, she had eyes for 'Aikawa-san' only. Makes me a lil jealous."

"I kind of agree... It's not like I'm strangers with Kasugai-san. I'll give you a few places she might be at."

"Helps a lot."

"I'm envious of people like that. It's like they're really free. Well, Kasugai-san must have her own worries though."

"Agreed."

Aikawa-san said.

"Err—speaking of freedom, how is Zerozaki-kun doing?"

"No...the last time I saw him was when we parted ways four years ago."

"Isn't he a friend? At least take contact."

"It's fine, we're fine like that," I said. "When the necessity comes, we'll both meet up again. What, if it's about him, he'll fly right back some day."

"Wouldn't he unexpectedly turn up dead somewhere?"

"It's certainly true he's not fit for society... But, he should be totally okay in his domain. I feel like he's probably living depending on someone out there."

"Yeah, I get that, totally. Using his cute face to get a woman to wipe his ass in his stead looks like Zerozaki-kun's style."

"No, I didn't go that far..."

"Then, if you see him, send a message for me—'If you can't restrain from killing someone, I'll be your opponent then.'"

"...I certainly got it."

A Demonic Killer who doesn't kill.

A Demonic Killer unable to kill.

It's—foolish.

I believed—that this tattoo boy was foolishly living somewhere as a clown.

It was an unwavering conviction.

...

Though I still didn't want to see him.

"Ah, right, right. The sequel of what I told you last time—you know, Sumiyuri Academy's ruins."

"Yes."

"That place became an empty lot."

"Aah, yeah it did. In the end, what will it become? I researched enough to know the Origami Foundation is preparing something, but—that's the limit of my skill, honestly."

"They're creating a school."

"...Coming full circle huh."

"No, it looks like a proper one this time."

Aikawa-san said.

"They'll properly, uprightly raise girls. I thought I'd have to crush them if they built that outrageous thing again, but it looks like I don't have to worry."

"It's probably—to atone for their sins."

"They're not that compassionate a bunch—they're only interested in getting the most benefits in the most efficient way. Leaving that spot free for four or five years was abnormal for them. They just couldn't get the idea. Mm...if they plan anything I'll kick their butt."

"Is that so."

"At that time, lend me a hand."

"Of course, rely on me without restraint, please."

“I also felt that when I learned it became a vacant spot—but having experienced all sorts of suffering and hardships there—it's deeply moving."

I see...

That and that and that and that,

All of it—will be things of the past.

They will be stories from long ago, I thought.

"It's not far back enough to get nostalgic—it's too early to make them good memories."

"It's only been four years, right? It's like yesterday."

"...Jun-san doesn't age at all, huh."

"Yeah. It seems I was made this way. Saiyans spent a long time looking young because they were a fighting tribe, right? Hehehe, that's a lucky surprise."

"..."

I wonder if it's good.

"But Magokoro continues growing at a good pace—how should I put it, she's more dignified, or cool. She looks the part, so I don't want to be side to side with her. I mean, in the first place, she was too much of a kid."

"Now there's no reason for her to—restrain herself."

"That's how it is. Thanks to you."

"Then it's fine."

Then—it's fine.

The current Magokoro—

Will experience many more good things.

I had no grounds for this selfish and illogical delusion, but—Omokage Magokoro living her life to the fullest was proof that this world wasn't just a tragedy.

"Hey, Jun-san."

I said.

"Saitou Takashi is—"

"Um?"

"No...it's something I've...continuously thought about in the last four years—why, at the very end, he chose to be killed by me."

"..."

"No, in the first place...why did he go along with that farce. At that time, I felt I had drawn out an appropriate understanding—but thinking about it anew, I don't get it at all. He didn't have to die, did he?"

"...Didn't have to die, huh."

"If we're talking about the origin, even before that—before that whole farce. Since September of that year, he had made a lot of contact with me—in the midst of it, I didn't think of it as that extreme, but thinking about it now—in the first place. That person...from the start, didn't he have no intent to win the fight against me? That’s what I came to think."

"No intent to win?"

"It feels like he purposely came to lose against me..."

"No, that's probably going too far. If Magokoro hadn't escaped, that dad would have pressed in further and surely crushed you."

"Maybe...I'm sure that's the case, but, at least, at that time, the fight was made to leave me the winner. He could have had an easy win—but he went out of his way to play out a close match. A close one, or a borderline one.

That's why 'did he want to lose'—'did he want to die.' I end up thinking thoughts like those. But, at that time—when I asked him 'Do you want to die,' he denied it. However—towards the end, no matter how you think about it, Saitou-san was trying to die. If I don't think that way, his actions don't quite make sense."

"I wouldn't think he wanted to die either."

"Eh... But..."

"But, he might have thought that dying was better. Ever since ten years before, when I failed to kill him."

"..."

"Because he was a wraith."

Aikawa-san said.

"Similarly to Kajou Akira—Saitou Takashi was a wraith. In the end, the one who got the best part of the cake among this friendly group of buffoons was Aikawa Junya... Hm. A wraith, and a lost child, huh? If there was someone able to comprehend him, he might have been able to rest in peace. ...But it's not something so simple. Also, if I had to say, all of that was probably that dad's whim."

"Whim..."

"'Well, it wouldn't be bad to get killed by him,' or something—didn't he think that way? As usual, randomly. Both Magokoro and Akira—must have had their own pondering to do."

"...Is that so."

"Thinking about it now—that time, that exact moment—might have been the only chance in this world to kill Humanity's Worst Player."

Aikawa-san said cynically.

"Thinking of it the other way around, that dad waited long enough and was finally able to die—he finally grasped a chance to die."

"That should be about right."

Wanting to die.

Thinking it's better to die.

Feeling—like dying.

"Either way, it's the past. No one can know the truth of things. Neither me nor you, and of course, not that dad either. That time—how should I say it, it was probably good timing."

Good timing.

That was—a remark which hit home.

It might have been better to pass each other.

Even now, I couldn't think that it was the best result.

It's was dubious whether I did everything I could.

However—

"At least—I have no regrets or reflections. That was that. In itself, it was fine as is."

"Ooh. How optimistic."

"At least, I want to admit my efforts of the time. The brat did his best in a way."

"Hmm. I see."

After that, it was just small talk.

I was just a newbie so I had plenty of free time, but as Aikawa-san said she was insanely busy. She couldn't spend much time in private, so the meal ended after one more hour,

"Then, I should go."

With her saying that.

"I'll pay."

"No real need to."

"Just accept it. Your current job is free of charge, right? In the contractor business, your capital is key at the start."

"Right—and that business card served as good advertisement. Well, okay. It was a cute highschool girl, so it's not like my motivation totally died. But, then, I'll let myself be spoiled this time."

"Mh."

Aikawa-san pulled her seat and stood up.

"...Right. This is something I've wanted to ask since pretty long ago, may I now?"

"Eh?"

"It doesn't look like I'll be able to see you for a while. I'm busy and you too, will probably soon be. I wanted to ask whenever I could meet you."

"It's fine with me."

"Four years ago, why—didn't you think of retiring?"

"..."

"That must have been a good quitting point, right? To retire from everything you were involved with. All the foreshadowing had disappeared, every bond had dissolved. Your connection with every little detail, with every abnormality—had been severed."

Aikawa-san continued with a rare serious look and tone, without any hints of being joking.

"In spite of that, you came into my business. After getting through all these harsh events—didn't you learn anything? Even if you're an idiot, you must have understood, no?"

"I'm not really wise."

I immediately answered.

That was—something I had thought about many times.

Many, many times.

When someone would ask—

An answer I could give proudly.

But, in the end.

The one to ask first was Aikawa-san.

"Also, I'm not good at remembering. If I didn't continue, I would have forgotten the past."

"..."

"Though I don't want to remember that period... I mustn't forget—that's all."

"...I see. Really, you're unequalled, I swear."

Aikawa-san smiled as if having fun.

That was—an expression I couldn't see often.

"But wouldn't it be buried under the sea of memories? In those four years—a lot must've happened, right?"

"A lot happened. But, well, even then, memorable events fade with time," I said. "With the logic of 'The present exists because the past existed,'—forgetting that period would be denying the present, right? For some reason, it's unpleasant."

"Unpleasant, huh?"

"If even someone like me can become someone's replacement—that shouldn't be a bad thing."

"Someone's replacement?"

Aikawa-san shrugged her shoulders.

"Idiot. I swear, are you still saying that? You can only say that at the start. In reality, being a contractor isn't anything like becoming someone's replacement."

"...Then, for Jun-san, what exactly is a contractor?"

"Isn't that obvious? It's for someone's sake."

Aikawa-san said nonchalantly.

"For the sake of someone I love, I can become as strong as needed—I can do anything. That's definitely not something bad, right?"

"...Right."

I—

I nodded.

"I think so too."

For someone's—sake.

For someone's sake.

"I want to do something—for someone's sake."

"You're really stupid."

Aikawa-san grinned.

"Despite saying you don't want to forget, haven't you already forgotten? You were probably told that by Hikari or Teruko, but you've been doing that all this time normally, haven't you?"

"...Then it might really be my vocation."

"I bet."

Then, Aikawa-san said,

"Well then, I have good news for you."

Her expression turned back to being mean.

As if—

As if she only came here today to tell me this.

"My dad is again—planning on doing something."

I—

After hearing that, firmly nodded.

"I don't mind. Then I'll just have to hinder him again."

Then, trying to be as cool as possible, I said.

"Because I decided I'd follow him all my life."

Parting with Aikawa-san, on the way back I didn't use a taxi or the bus, but just walked leisurely along Karasuma Street, thinking back about every little thing I talked about with Aikawa-san.

Various things.

Things that wouldn't fade.

After that, I quit university.

In the end, quitting halfway through again.

The only thing I earned with the ER Program was *qualification* equal to having finished high school. Would that make elementary school my last academic background? No, it probably wouldn't, but I was somewhat scared to check that aspect.

Retiring halfway through—

I wandered for a while, but in the end, I imitated Aikawa-san and decided to become a contractor. I already told the reasoning to Aikawa-san earlier.

I didn't want to deny—

Everyone I had been involved with up to then.

Though it's not like I wanted to affirm them...

But, well.

Apart from that—I simply admired her.

Though that's something I would never confess to Aikawa-san, no matter how much I grew—'I want to become like Aikawa Jun,' that was my thought process.

Like Aikawa Jun did, I want to get involved with people.

That was my wish.

That's why... It's like, rather than liking Aikawa-san, I've always wanted to become like her.

Even now.

And in the future too.

"Well, that kind of thing is..."

Miiko-san was 26 and still a freeter. Her salary was raised as much as the space of the apartment, so the antiques were constantly flowing in. At this point, she should start a museum or something.

As Nureginu-san predicted, Houko-chan lost all the talent as an assassin that had been drilled into her head. However, her sharpness didn't change, so she was growing, and even now helping me in all sorts of ways in my jobs. Of course, without a way to make money, she couldn't pay for the higher rent, so I'm paying for half of it. I'll get back what she owes me someday... No matter what happens, I'll definitely get back what she owes me, so for now it was natural for both of us.

Koutoumaru-san trained his muscles as usual. Recently, it looks like he's been making a truce with Miiko-san. Maybe he awakened to his oriental preferences. I still end up jealous when seeing Miiko-san getting along well with other men, so it was a source of trouble for me.

Nanananami quit the university she went to at the same time as me, and became a mangaka. She's drawing in a minor shounen magazine, getting some fame with touches somewhat comprehensible for the average reader and stories somewhat incomprehensible for the average reader. I sometimes help her. It seems recently she's been troubled over human relationships with her editor. Thinking that even this woman had a delicate part warmed my heart.

"...Oops. It was close."

I realized I walked along the Kyoto Imperial Garden before I noticed, l looked around. It was right in front of Nakadachiuri.

Umu.

I crossed the traffic light and this time walked while looking sideways at the town of Kyoto. I realized I haven't had the chance to walk that way often recently.

I'd stayed in contact with Emoto-san and Rurero-san ever since... Actually, I'd been close to them, however, unlike four years ago, unlike that time where I would be wrapped in bandages everyday, I stopped repeating my short trips to the hospital.

Maybe I became more cautious.

Or perhaps I became even more cowardly.

Whether that was growth or not wasn't something for me to judge...but regardless, it was a good thing I didn't get injured now.

Bad luck and misfortune continued around me without pause, all a succession of troubles and accidents—and as Aikawa-san said, enough things happened, enough to make the events from four years ago hazy, but...

I no longer wished for quiet time.

—But.

Even then, unlike before, not many people died.

There were plenty of times where people got sad.

There were plenty of times where people got hurt.

Doing all of those jobs might have been a source of why I became optimistic, but I don't think that was all of it.

"Four years since then—"

Four years.

"And since then—ten years."

Ten years.

How young I was, I thought.

Although I was probably still young.

Even looking back at the last 4 years, I was still only failing and getting things wrong—but even then, I felt like I'd progressed compared to that time.

The failures were proof of my growth.

The pain of wounds fade away someday.

Well, at any rate—

The world was going strong today again.

"Now...I've become somewhat busy so—"

Let's tell—a little nonsense.

Arriving at Senbon Street, I headed towards the apartment.

I called back the elevator that had stopped at the highest floor.

For starters, I decided to resolve things in order, starting with Asahi-chan's case. Five in the evening. A time when I didn't need at all to wait for the next day to start anything.

I thought of the steps I would take in the elevator and arrived at the sixth floor with my office.

In front of the door, one woman was standing.

Jet black hair. A docile, long skirt, a high neck shirt, and a cardigan. Court shoes with thin soles, a small handbag hanging in front of her legs.

Only her left eye was—barely blue.

"Ah. Welcome back, Ii-chan."

"Mm. I'm home."

She was faintly smiling.

I answered with the best smile I could muster.

The happiness I was searching for was so far, but—

We were able to attain happiness.

While losing many things,

We earned something irreplaceable.

And so, this ambiguous and mechanical scrawling of unanswered questions, accompanied by a certainty so under-cooked it's practically unnatural, comes to its almost predictably anticlimactic end, like a vague, crimson fairy tale.

Kunagisa was at my side.

And like that, we walked alongside one another.

"After Festival" is the END.

"Juvenile Talk" is HAPPY END.

Congratulations!!

Afterword

The author of this text is a narrow-minded, twisted guy, to the point normal people would get creeped out at, so he basically hates happy endings and thinks the denouement should be indecisive and that, at the end of the story, bad guys shouldn't especially turn into good guys or that misfortunate people should become happy. Hearing that doesn't satisfy me. Bad guys don't have a change of heart, misfortunate people stay misfortunate—my belief behind writing is that people don't change, so my philosophy and doctrine is to find how they should live under those conditions. When writing the Zaregoto Series, I swore to myself that no matter how the Story turned out, that no matter how the characters grew, there would be no fundamental change. Not everything went as planned, but I think I was at least able to achieve that. There was no case of something being complemented by something else, and most cases were too late to do anything about. Having merely understood, there was attachment to every other choice of any decision—more than anything, there is no end anywhere. Even now, it's like everything is making preparations—just waiting to start. Even if you say everything is okay as long as it ends well, no one can be sure of where that end is, and any happy end of every novel might be from a printing error where 'That was a lie and in fact, everyone died,' was just missing from the end of the text—but, therefore, they live to the fullest in order to not hold regrets even if they were to die tomorrow. But still, with that way of thinking, I'm still not completely satisfied. What remained in your heart?

Needless to say, this book, *Uprooted Radical (Part Three): The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User*, is the sequel to *Uprooted Radical (Part One): The Thirteen Stairs* and *Uprooted Radical (Part Two): Overkill Red vs. The Orange Seed*, but also the conclusive last issue to the Zaregoto Series, comprised of *Decapitation Cycle : The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User*, *Strangulation*

Romanticist : Hitoshiki Zerozaki, No Longer Human, *Hanging High School : The Nonsense User's Disciple*, *Psychological (Part One) : Gaisuke Utsirugi's Nonsense Killer*, *Psychological (Part Two) : Sour Little Song*, *Cannibal Magical : Niounomiya Siblings, Masters of Carnage*. For an author, anything they created is simultaneously their greatest masterpiece and their greatest failure. In other words, they continue to write incomplete works that won't ever get completed, but, if you could interpret the 2 million nonsensical words I worked hard to produce as something more or less than a simple number, I would be overjoyed beyond my hopes.

Publishing this work was so full of hardships I wanted to ask anyone lying around to just kill me. Many things happened, but thanks to the hard work of my editor in-charge Oota-san, and illustrator in-charge Take-san, we were somewhat able to achieve it. However, this time, more than anyone, one person stuck through until the very end, that being the reader, you. I want to dedicate to you my modest words of gratitude. Thank you very much for reading with affection.

Nisio Isin